Double Issue

NFL PREVIEW /// 2016

Sports Illustrated

SCOUTING REPORTS
All 32 Teams: How They'll Finish
All 267 Games: How They'll End
// P. 66 //

BIG BANGER
Von Miller:
QB Terrorizer. Exploding Star
BY GREG BISHOP // P. 34

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WINNING TIME
The Art and Science Of Clock Management
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LINEUP

NFL Preview 2016

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By Michael McKnight

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Scouting reports for all 32 teams, plus predictions for every regular-season and playoff game

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The End of Football
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SI HAS FOUR REGIONAL COVERS
AL TIELEMANS (ANTONIO BROWN); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (LARRY FITZGERALD); JAMIE SCHWABEROW (VON MILLER); BOB DONNAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (CAM NEWTON, BACKGROUNDS)

ANTONIO BROWN, AT STEELERS CAMP IN PITTSBURGH 8.20.2016

Photograph by Al Tielemans

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Sports Illustrated

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ERROL SPENCE JR. The 26-year-old welterweight boxer and former Olympian discusses corruption in amateur boxing after several referees and judges were removed from the Rio Games over disputed results.

RYAN ASSELTA: *Irish bantamweight Michael Conlan said he was robbed of victory and that the International Boxing Association cheats after his controversial loss to Russia's Vladimir Nikitin in the quarterfinals in Rio. You had some controversy with your fight at the London Games in 2012—you initially lost, but that decision was overturned on appeal. When you hear Conlan's sentiments, do you agree with what he said?*

ERROL SPENCE JR.: It's the truth. People get robbed all of the time. They [AIBA] have their favorites. Unfortunately it's a lot of politics in Olympic and amateur boxing. Hopefully they can change it, but it's been going on for a long time. We saw it in [Seoul] 1988 when Roy Jones Jr. got robbed for the gold. We saw Evander Holyfield get robbed in the Olympics [in 1984]. Somebody needs to step up and stop it because it's a shame when fighters have been training their whole lives to fight for their country and then they get to the Olympics and get robbed. It's breaking these kids' hearts and turning them away from Olympic boxing. Why fight in the Olympics when you can just turn pro and make money, and not have to worry about this type of corruption?

RA: *You mentioned that politics is an issue. Money has been reported to be involved. Can it be fixed or is it a no-win situation?*

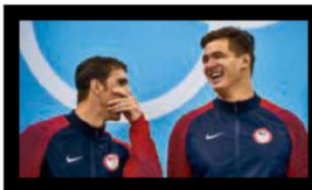
ES: It can definitely be fixed. AIBA has too much power. Participating countries need to take a stand and say, If AIBA keeps this up, then we're not going to fight in your tournaments. □

"Why fight in the Olympics when you can just turn pro and make money?"
–Errol Spence Jr.

For more of Spence's interview, plus the SI Now archives, go to ***SI.com/sinow***

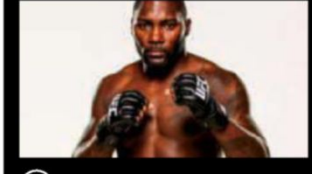
TUNE IN

EPISODE: AUG. 15
SI baseball writer Jay Jaffe looks at Red Sox outfielder **Mookie Betts**'s chances of being named AL MVP



EPISODE: AUG. 16
U.S. swimmer **Nathan Adrian** shares what it's like to be **Michael Phelps**'s teammate

EPISODE: AUG. 17
1984 Olympic gold medalist **Mary Lou Retton** discusses how gymnastics has changed over the years



EPISODE: AUG. 18
UFC light heavyweight **Anthony Johnson** says MMA fighters need a union, like pros in other sports

JOHN BIEVER (SPENCE); OTTO GREULE JR./GETTY IMAGES (BETTS); DONALD MIRALLE (ADRIAN AND PHELPS); NEIL LEIFER (RETTON); MIKE ROACH/ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON)

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1 of 3

Leading Off

Rio 2016

Around The Rings

Scenes from The Rio Games

Aug. 18
OLYMPIC STADIUM

Usain Bolt of Jamaica sprinted to an unprecedented triple double—his third straight Olympic gold medal in the 200 meters, to add to his third straight in the 100. The next day he would achieve an even more historic triple triple, anchoring Jamaica's 4×100 relay team to a third consecutive gold.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOE MCNALLY

Around The Rings

Scenes from The Rio Games

Aug. 20
MARACANÃ

Brazil's soccer team knelt nervously (and perhaps in prayer) as Neymar struck the team's fifth penalty kick against German goalkeeper Timo Horn after overtime ended in a 1–1 tie. An instant later, as the ball settled in the net, the crowd of 78,000 erupted in celebration of a 5–4 win on PKs and the men's soccer team's first gold medal.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JORDAN MURPH

(FOLLOWING SPREAD PHOTOGRAPHY BY) DONALD MIRALLE (14); BOB MARTIN (11); ROBERT BECK (5); SIMON BRUTY (5); THOMAS LOVELOCK; ERICK W. RASCO; JACK GUEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (2); CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES; SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES; BRYN LENNON/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY IMAGES; TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES; BEN STANSALL/GETTY IMAGES; IAN WALTON/GETTY IMAGES

Leading Off

3 of 3

Rio 2016

U.S. Gold

46 Medals

200m Backstroke
Maya DiRado

10m Air Rifle
Virginia Thrasher

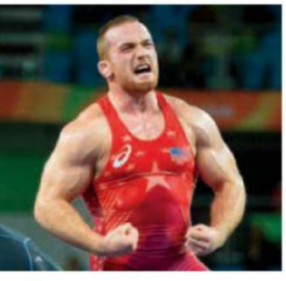
100m Freestyle
Simone Manuel

Vault
Simone Biles

200m Backstroke
Ryan Murphy

Shot Put
Michelle Carter

4 × 400m
Women's Relay Team

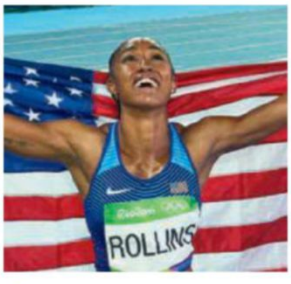


97kg Freestyle Wrestling
Kyle Snyder

4 × 200m Freestyle
Men's Relay Team

4 × 200m Freestyle
Women's Relay Team

800m Freestyle
Katie Ledecky



100m Hurdles
Brianna Rollins

78kg Judo
Kayla Harrison

Floor Exercise
Simone Biles

Long Jump
Tianna Bartoletta

Mixed Doubles Tennis
Bethanie Mattek-Sands and Jack Sock

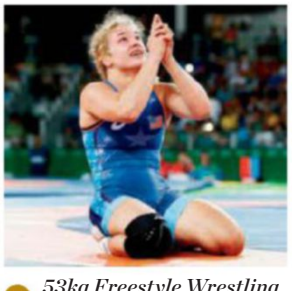
Rowing
Women's Eight

400m Freestyle
Katie Ledecky

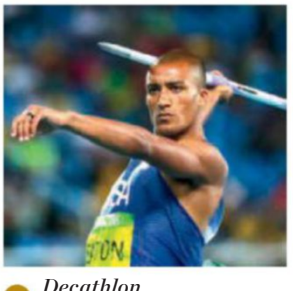
1,500m
Matthew Centrowitz Jr.

75kg Middleweight Boxing
Claressa Shields

50m Freestyle
Anthony Ervin



53kg Freestyle Wrestling
Helen Maroulis



Decathlon
Ashton Eaton

400m Hurdles
Kerron Clement

Long Jump
Jeff Henderson

Men's Basketball

Individual All-Around
Simone Biles

Women's Water Polo

200m Individual Relay
Michael Phelps

BMX
Connor Fields

4 × 100m Medley
Women's Relay Team

Time Trial
Kristin Armstrong

Team All-Around

4 × 100m Medley
Men's Relay Team

100m Breaststroke
Lilly King

200m Butterfly
Michael Phelps

4 × 400m
Men's Relay Team

Shot Put
Ryan Crouser

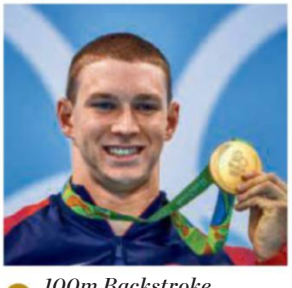
Women's Basketball

Triathlon
Gwen Jorgensen

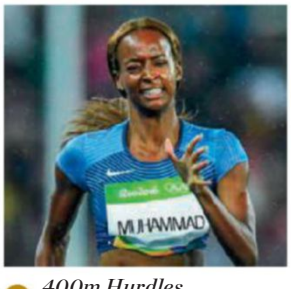
200m Freestyle
Katie Ledecky

Triple Jump
Christian Taylor

4 × 100m
Women's Relay Team



100m Backstroke
Ryan Murphy

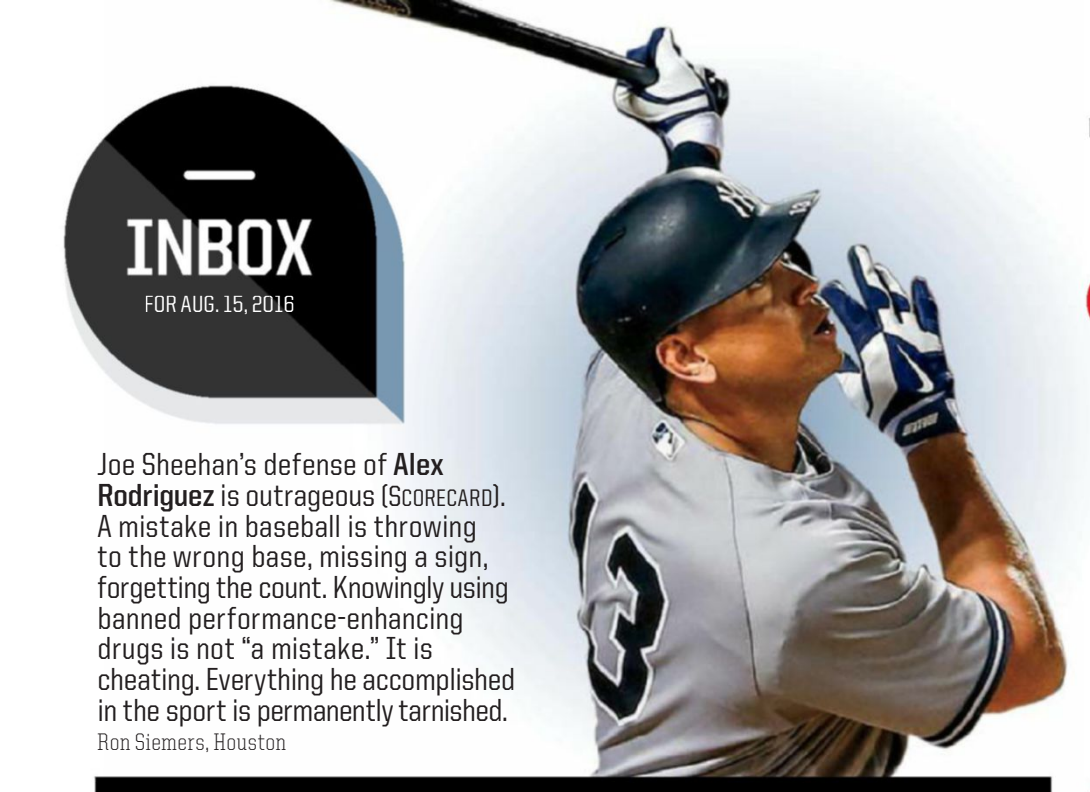


400m Hurdles
Dalilah Muhammad

4 × 100m Freestyle
Men's Relay Team

INBOX

FOR AUG. 15, 2016



Joe Sheehan's defense of **Alex Rodriguez** is outrageous (SCORECARD). A mistake in baseball is throwing to the wrong base, missing a sign, forgetting the count. Knowingly using banned performance-enhancing drugs is not "a mistake." It is cheating. Everything he accomplished in the sport is permanently tarnished.
Ron Siemers, Houston

Imagine if Nolan Ryan was told he needed to take hormones to slow his fastball because his was too hard to hit. Unless Caster Semenya is proved to have lied about her sexual identity or to have used performance-enhancers *(Engendering Debate)*, her competitors should be told to just deal with it.
Laurence Siegel, Manteno, Ill.

CORRECTION In a photo in *The Metrics System* in the Aug. 22 issue, we incorrectly identified Paul Goldschmidt as **Jake Lamb**. SI regrets the error.

Pete Thamel's profile on Josh Rosen left me very unimpressed. It seems that the quarterback's antics and bravado off the field are interfering with his potential to be better, both as an athlete and as a representative of his university.
Sara Nguyen, Plymouth Meeting, Pa.

COVER

Excited to find the College Football Preview in my mailbox, I was ready to ponder the question on the cover: Where's Your School? The disappointing answer? Not in your issue. I guess the SI universe doesn't extend beyond the Top 25.
Mike Challman
Wayne, Pa.

PAGE 25

SCORECARD

Just because Michael Vick is allowed to own a dog doesn't mean he should. While all people can learn and grow from mistakes, a person's character is shown in how he treats the voiceless. How well he throws a football doesn't change that.
Lisa Harrison
Lansing, Mich.

PAGE 94

POINT AFTER

My thanks to Franz Lidz for sharing his sweet reminiscence. I felt bad that he lost his day in the limelight, but I felt so very good after reading it. Storytelling doesn't get much better than that.
Jim Valvoda
London, Tenn.

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Edited by **JIM GORANT** + **TED KEITH**

SCORECARD

A Win at the Whistle

The Rio Olympics, beset by financial and logistical problems, ended in success thanks in part to a brilliant performance by a homegrown hero

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

THERE YOU GO. It's what we've muttered nine times now, over three Olympics, after each race Usain Bolt ran. And it's what Bolt told the world in Rio de Janeiro last week, Ali-like, after winning his third gold medal of the 2016 Games, in the 4 × 100 relay, to make nine in his Olympic career: "There you go, I am the greatest." He said it as if making a gift of his performance and an offering of himself.

The Rio Olympics weren't the greatest, not by most measures. But the city made its own offering to the world by hosting the Games under extraordinary duress. With so many real problems, Rio hardly deserved fabrications sprung from the imagination of swimmer Ryan Lochte.

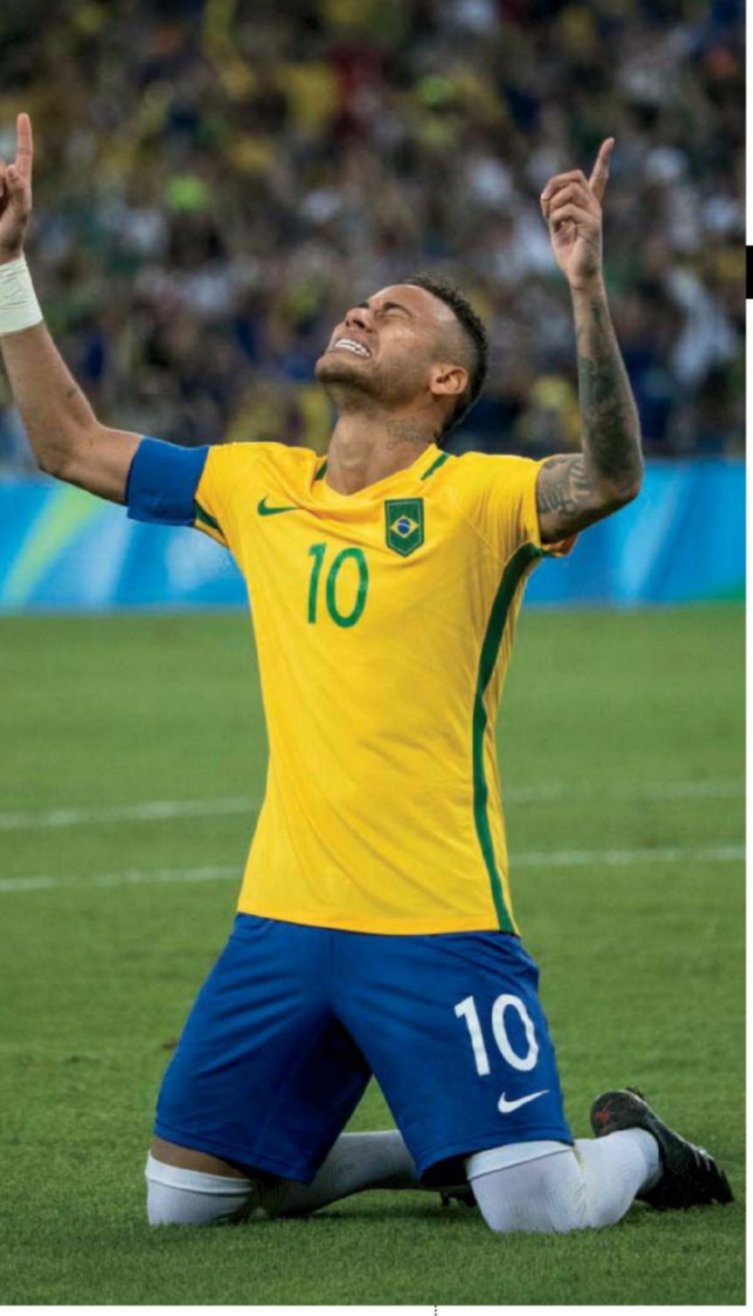
IOC president Thomas Bach has a knack for putting even the most disconcerting development in a positive light, and he described Brazil's challenges as a welcome intrusion of the real world. "This was very good for everybody, to be close to reality, not to be in a bubble for 16 days, isolated from a country, from a society" he said. Mario Andrada, the endearingly frank spokesman for the organizing committee, didn't spin nearly as hard. "We overpromised and underdelivered," he confessed. With generous comments, he showed those U.S. swimmers more forgiveness than they probably deserved. Andrada modeled KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON as well as any Londoner did four years ago.

A former editor of this magazine used to say, "There's nothing more over than the Olympics when they're over." It was his way of both recognizing the Games' valedictory quality and underscoring that kickoffs awaited in Tuscaloosa and Green Bay. But the comment gets at a larger problem. Even with the move during the '90s to stagger Summer and Winter Games at two-year intervals, many Olympic sports and the athletes who practice them drop from view for long stretches. The IOC's Olympic Channel, launched during Sunday's closing ceremony, proposes to redress this with the motto *Where the games never end.* It will be less TV network than digital platform, calculated to reach the generation that's supposed to kindle to sports such as BMX and snowboarding. In fact, millennials aren't just ignoring the Olympics (ratings for Rio in the 18-to-34 age range were down from London by 30%), they're rejecting them. Through last weekend some 7,000 skateboarders and their supporters had signed an online petition demanding that their sport, just voted into the 2020 Tokyo Olympics by the IOC, *not* be included in the Games.

Another item on the IOC's agenda is more immediately problematic. In its efforts simply to stage the Olympics, Rio has so neglected the Paralympics that they threaten to be an underfunded shambles. As of last week only 12% of tickets had been sold, and a budget shortfall imperiled efforts to fly Paralympians in for the event, which begins on Sept. 7. To help close the gap, Rio mayor Eduardo Paes stepped in with $50 million in municipal funds, and several state-owned companies may yet sign on as sponsors. "Never before in the 56-year history of the Paralympic Games have we faced circumstances like this," International Paralympic Committee president Sir Philip Craven said. "Clearly Brazil is in a far different position now than it was in 2009 when it won the right to stage the Games." All of which helps explain why 60% of Brazilians, polled two weeks before the Olympics began, believed the Games would do the country more harm than good.

And then, on the final weekend, something

SIMON BRUTY (NEYMAR); DAVID ROGERS/GETTY IMAGES (FLAG)



GAIL BURTON/AP (MACHADO); KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); ALEX TRAUTWIG/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (LITTLE LEAGUE)

happened: Neymar (*above*), the soccer prodigy held out of the Copa América so he might stay fresh enough to lead Brazil to the Olympic gold it had never won, struck the penalty kick that did just that, beating Germany, which had humiliated Brazil 7–1 in the 2014 World Cup semifinals. Only a few people have so dramatically delivered gold in their national sport at a home Olympics. In London, Danny Boyle's opening ceremony gave the British permission to feel good about their Games; Brazilians got the green light at the end of theirs with Neymar's act of exorcism. A post-Olympics poll—especially after two other second-week men's golds for the home team, in volleyball and beach volleyball, both major sports in Brazil—will surely reverse those July disapproval numbers.

The journey of Neymar and the *seleção* is an allegory of Rio's Olympic effort: high expectations, growing doubts, frustration, then success and release. The team failed to score in its first two games, touching off widespread criticism and a stampede of support to the women's side and Neymar's No. 10 counterpart, Marta. A gold medal on the sacred turf of Maracanã might have made the whole Olympic enterprise worth it.

Yet the closing ceremony devoted a segment to *saudade*, a particularly Brazilian kind of longing that can be tinged with regret. The word nails what it feels like to look back at the year Rio landed the Olympics and Paralympics, when staging them seemed so much easier. To overpromise and underdeliver will touch off a bout of *saudade*.

But even if the legacy of the Rio Olympics is mixed, what Cariocas did do over 2½ weeks ticked every box laid out by the French nobleman who founded the modern Games. "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part," Pierre de Coubertin wrote. "The essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well."

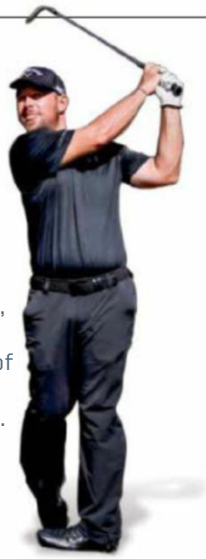
Rio took part. Cariocas fought well. Under trying circumstances, they tried their best. □

GO FIGURE

4

Orioles who hit first-inning home runs last Friday at Camden Yards—Adam Jones, **Manny Machado**, Chris Davis and Mark Trumbo—making Baltimore the first team to have four of its first five batters go deep. The Orioles lost to the Astros 15–8.

2



Consecutive years that **Scott Brown** has made a hole in one on the 174-yard, par-3 3rd hole, during the fourth round of the Wyndham Championship. It's the second time in PGA Tour history a player aced the same hole at the same course in back-to-back years. Brown finished tied for 33rd.

54

Years since **Japan**, the defending champion, lost its first two games at the Little League World Series. The team from Tokyo opened with a 10–4 loss to Canada last Friday and was eliminated the next day by Curaçao, which won 2–1.

TENNIS

+

Raise the Roof

A year of transition for the U.S. Open

FROM RUMORS OF match-fixing to a doping scandal to a debate over equal prize money, tennis in 2016 has often drawn its biggest headlines for what happens off the court. Amid the chaos, though, matches were played, trophies were lifted and the tentpole events continued to thrill. The most profitable of those, the U.S. Open, starts Monday and runs through Sept. 11 in Flushing Meadow, N.Y., and like the sport itself, the tournament has several significant story lines unrelated to the matches. *—Jamie Lisanti*

ABSENT STARS Five-time winner Roger Federer (rehabbing a left-knee injury) and 2006 women's champion Maria Sharapova (serving a two-year suspension after failing a drug test) are the two most notable names missing from the draw. Add to that list seventh-ranked Victoria Azarenka, who in July announced that she was expecting her first child, and No. 8 Tomas Berdych (appendicitis).

SILVER LINING Fresh off a silver medal in Rio, 2009 champion Juan Martín del Potro, 27, returns to the Open after being sidelined with left-wrist injuries the past two summers. He'll try to become the first unseeded entrant to win the men's title since Andre Agassi in 1994.

COURT COVERAGE A $150 million retractable roof over Arthur Ashe Stadium, which is designed to open or close in seven minutes, will make its debut at this year's tournament. That leaves the French Open's Roland Garros as the only Grand Slam venue without a means to avoid weather delays and cancellations.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

+

Retreating Tide

OVER THE LAST five years Alabama has had the top-rated recruiting class twice and the second-ranked class twice and once ranked fourth, according to Scout.com. That success in the living room leads to a backlog in the locker room, with four- and five-star recruits stacked up at almost every position. The result? Championships (four of the last seven) and transfers. Below is a list of 15 former Crimson Tide studs who'll suit up for other teams in '16. If they all went to one school, they'd be the core of a pretty good squad. *—Nicole Caci*

PLAYER	POS.	STAR RATING	↓ NEW SCHOOL
Charles Baldwin	OT	★★★★★	Kansas
Christian Bell	OLB	★★★	Wisconsin
Chris Black	WR	★★★★	Missouri
Shawn Burgess-Becker	S	★★★★	Central Florida
Daylon Charlot	WR	★★★★	Kansas
Jonathan Cook	CB	★★★	Memphis
Luke Del Rio	QB	★★★	Florida
Tyren Jones	RB	★★★★	Hutchinson CC
Alvin Kamara	RB	★★★★	Tennessee
Dee Liner	DT	★★★★	Arkansas St.
Kendall Sheffield	CB	★★★★★	Blinn College
Maurice Smith	CB	★★★★	Georgia
Jonathan Taylor	DE	★★★★	SE Louisiana
Adonis Thomas	ILB	★★★★	NW Mississippi CC
Ricky Town	QB	★★★★	Arkansas

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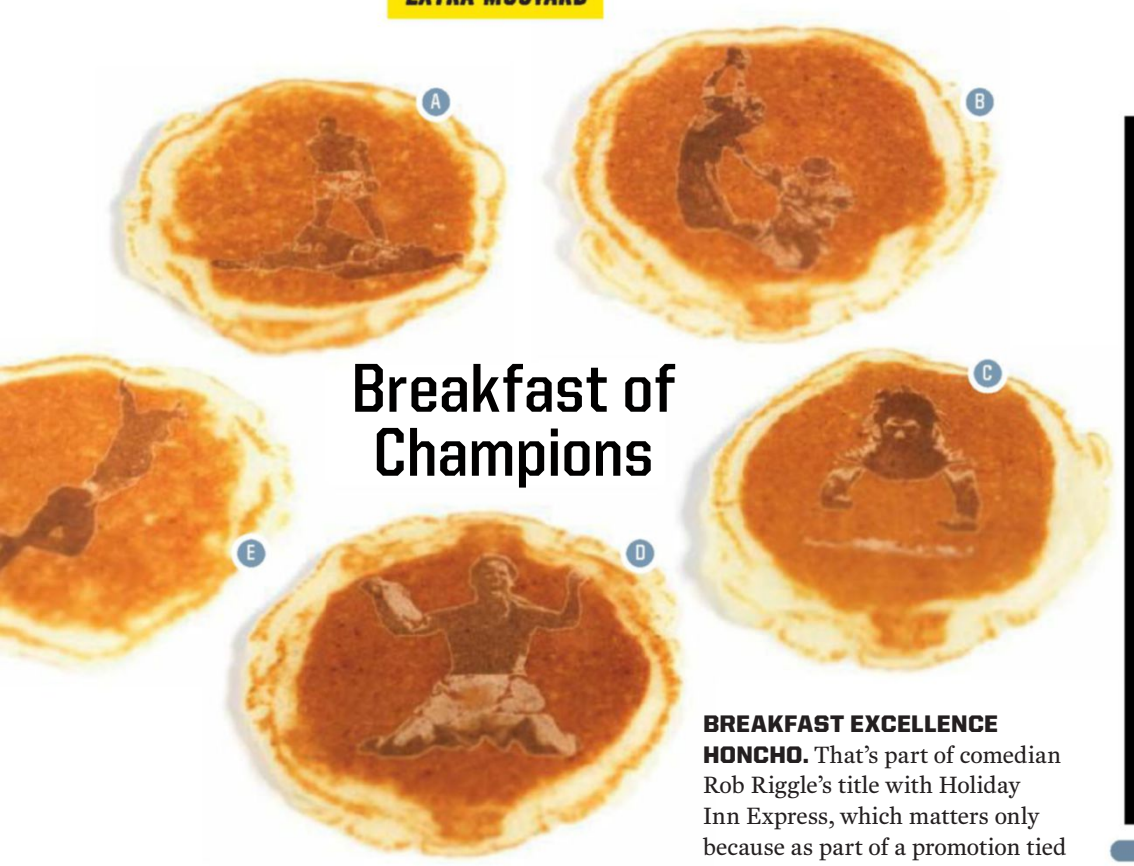
EXTRA MUSTARD

Breakfast of Champions



BREAKFAST EXCELLENCE HONCHO. That's part of comedian Rob Riggle's title with Holiday Inn Express, which matters only because as part of a promotion tied to that gig, Riggle and his laser-printing pancake-making machine showed up outside SI's offices last week. While the tool was meant to replicate selfies, we challenged Riggle to re-create five iconic images from our archives. Watch a video of the Pancake Selfie Express at SI.com/pancakeart.

A. Ali over Sonny Liston, 1965
B. The Catch, Dwight Clark, 1982
C. Pete Rose goes in hard, 1975
D. Brandi Chastain ices the World Cup, 1999
E. Kerri Strug sticks the landing, 1996

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Brandon Thomas, an outfielder for the independent Gateway Grizzlies, hit a grand slam during a 17-6 win over the Joliet Slammers on Aug. 21, only to discover that the ball broke the windshield of his truck.

Fighting Irishman
Conor McGregor avenged his loss to Nate Diaz at UFC 202. Now he can get back to selling Lucky Charms.

HOT ▲

NOT ▼

Fighting Irish
Six ND players were arrested in one night. Fans long for last week, when their biggest controversy was over QBs.

THEY SAID IT

"IT WAS HOURS LATER, SO I WAS STILL INTOXICATED."

Ryan Lochte // U.S. swimmer, explaining why he "over exaggerated" in the original morning-after account of his confrontation with gas-station security guards in Rio.

NEIL LEIFER (ALI); WALTER IOOSS JR. (CLARK); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (ROSE); ROBERT BECK (CHASTAIN); AL TIELEMANS (STRUG); COURTESY OF HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS (PANCAKES); ROBERT BECK (LOCHTE); TWITTER (APOC); JOSH HEDGES/ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES (MCGREGOR); MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES (BRIAN KELLY)

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Rio2016

Survivor Pool

An injured veteran dives in

ON SEPT. 7, 2011, Brad Snyder was a U.S. Navy ordnance disposal officer in Afghanistan when he stepped on an IED, with his face taking the brunt of the explosion. After a week of surgeries, he ultimately lost his sight. Exactly a year later, the former Naval Academy swim team captain won his second gold medal at the 2012 Paralympic Games in London, in the 400-meter freestyle. (He had won the 100-meter a week earlier.) Before heading to Rio for next month's Games, Snyder met with SI to discuss his journey and what comes next. *—Dan Greene*

LONDON SCENE Despite being injured in battle, Snyder won two gold medals in 2012.

SI: *Have you been able to step back at all and process the last five years?*

BS: Because of the immensity of [London] and the surreal aspect of it, I didn't really absorb it as much as I could have. I had only been blind for a year, and there's a huge adjustment in how you perceive the world. Five years later, I'm more comfortable. There has been a maturation as far as adapting to being blind and in who I am and my place in the world.

SI: *When was it after the explosion that you decided to get into the pool?*

BS: The first weekend they let me out [of the VA facility, in late October], my community down in St. Petersburg had this big barbecue, and my old swim coach was there. All these people were crying and upset because I was blind. I didn't like that everybody was sad. My coach came up to me afterward and jokingly was like, You wanna come to Saturday practice? It was a Friday night. I was like, Sure thing, Coach. It was an off-hand joke, but I needed a way to return to normal as quickly as possible. That's where it started.

SI: *You've said London felt like living someone else's life. What do you remember most about it?*

BS: The most poignant memory is the podium after the 400. Leading up to that night, there were hundreds of Facebook messages from people in my life. Then I go to an arena that has 18,000 people in it, including my mom, my brothers, friends from the Navy, people I don't even know. Then there's people around the world watching. And I'm on the podium listening to the anthem and thinking of everything that's happened and all of those people who are connected to that moment. It was really quite moving.

SI: *Obviously, Sept. 7 is a big day for you. What is that date like now?*

BS: For me it's great to have an Alive Day, because everybody celebrates their birthday but none of us did anything special on our birthday. It's just something that kind of happened to us. My Alive Day, I was very much deliberately in that situation. It's a great day to just take stock and be glad that, despite the blindness, I've been able to return to the same level of happiness and fulfillment that I had before.

SI: *Where do you keep your medal?*

BS: In my suitcase because I'm on the road perpetually, talking to audiences. You put that gold medal in front of a kid, and you start to see that dream being born. Or [in front of] someone who broke their neck on an ATV or whatever, and they can see there is life after disability.

SI: *There's a movie possibly, right?*

BS: We [with co-author Tom Sileo] have a book that comes out in September called *Fire in My Eyes*. We're in preproduction for the film. I'm hopeful. I think there's real merit to the story. □

PARALYMPIC FACTS

4,350 ATHLETES

176 COUNTRIES

528 MEDALS AWARDED

22 EVENTS

2 NEW EVENTS (canoe and triathlon)

SCOTT HEAVEY/GETTY IMAGES

BRAD SNYDER
Visually Impaired,
U.S. Paralympic Swimming

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EDGE FRIDGE RAIDER

Weighting for Gaudreau

A hockey star fights to fill out his frame

JOHNNY GAUDREAU HAS a problem. The 23-year-old Calgary Flames star has to make sure his body can withstand the beating of an 82-game schedule. His solution will make most people envious. "Keep eating, keep eating, that's my motto," says Gaudreau, who is set to join Team North America at the World Cup of Hockey in Toronto in September. "Eat as much as you can and just keep eating."

The 5' 9", 157-pound winger is the lightest player in the NHL, and he struggles to maintain what little mass he has. "I could eat McDonald's for three weeks in a row and would still need to keep gaining weight," says Gaudreau, who scored a team-high 30 goals last season.

That doesn't mean he eats whatever he wants; there is a method to his munching. Every meal, even in the off-season, is filled with protein. On a typical day he plows through a giant breakfast before practice, downs some hearty Italian food after and finishes up the night with a big slab of meat. He doesn't even keep his favorite cereal, Fruity Pebbles, in the house, because he'll end up downing three bowls instead of something with more weight-producing punch.

Indulgences? Gaudreau still goes for ice cream every once in a while—chocolate, out of the carton, no toppings—but he knows it's all about the protein if he wants to keep scoring. *—Jeremy Fuchs*

Fast Start

Gaudreau loads up on eggs before his morning skate. He'll either have a scoopful of scrambled eggs with bacon and cheddar cheese, or a helping of steak and eggs. He'll combine that with cranberry or orange juice and perhaps a coffee on his way to the rink.

Postpractice

As soon as practice ends he heads to the nearest restaurant with an empty stomach. Most days Gaudreau fills that void with two pieces of chicken Parmesan and a side of penne.

Pregame

The afternoon meal will hold him over until 5 p.m., when he has fruit and a PB&J sandwich. "You don't want to be too full by the time the game comes," says Gaudreau. "Just full enough to play."

Postgame

After 20 minutes of ice time, Gaudreau needs to replenish. The strategy? "Getting as much food in my body as I can," he says. It's often a steak–pepper and squeezed lemon, no sauce. Sometimes he'll vary it by having fish or chicken in barbecue sauce. Even if he's full, Gaudreau presses on. "I burn a lot of calories," he says. "I need to make sure I put that back on. I remind myself I need to maintain my weight and finish the whole meal."

AL TIELEMANS (GAUDREAU); LAURI PATTERSON (EGGS); THECRIMSONMONKEY (PB&J); NINO MASCARDI/GETTY IMAGES (STEAK)

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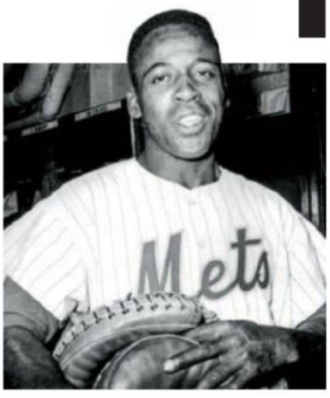

TRIBUTE

Choo Choo Coleman

Clarence (Choo Choo) Coleman, a catcher for the Mets in 1962 and '63, when they went 91–231, died of cancer on Aug. 15 in Orangeburg, S.C. He was 80. Coleman only played in parts of four seasons, but his legend has stood the test of time. He earned his nickname for his speed, which was more notable than his fielding. In '63 he had 15 errors and 11 passed balls in just 66 starts. Those deficiencies could be as hard on pitchers as himself; Chuck Churn called Coleman the toughest player he ever pitched to. He was perhaps most beloved for his unwitting one-liners. According to one anecdote, when Mets broadcaster Ralph Kiner asked Coleman, "What's your wife's name, and what's she like?" he replied, "Her name is Mrs. Coleman—and she likes me, Bub." —A.F.

Ian Zamudio | *Riverside, Calif.* | *Football*

Ian, a 5' 9" senior running back, defensive back at Notre Dame High, led his Ground Zero 7-on-7 team to the Best of the West High School Elite title in Placentia. As a junior he had 81 carries for 734 yards and 10 touchdowns, with 35 catches for 421 yards and five TDs to lead the Titans to a 14–0 record en route to the CIF Northwest Division crown.

Emilee Hoffman | *Folsom, Calif.* | *Golf*

Hoffman, a recent graduate of Vista del Lago High, shot a five-under 279 to win the 48th annual Big "I" National Championship, at Sacramento's Del Paso Country Club, by five strokes. Her second-round 64 broke the course record (66) set by the LPGA's Juli Inkster in 2006. Ranked No. 3 in her class by Golfweek.com, Hoffman will play at Texas.

Ryan Schoppe | *La Porte, Texas* | *Track and Field*

Ryan, an incoming freshman at La Porte High, set two state records in winning a pair of gold medals at the Texas Amateur Athletic Federation Games meet in McAllen. He took the 3,200 meters in 10:11.55, besting the previous mark of 10:17.14 set in 2011, and he won the 1,600 in 4:36.77 to break the '04 record by 3.17 seconds.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**

Milan Stokes | *Long Beach, Calif.* | *Volleyball*

Stokes, a recent graduate of Wilson High, had a team-high .300 hitting percentage to help her Mizuno Long Beach Rockstar club to fifth place in the 18-and-under open division at junior nationals in Indianapolis. A 5' 11" outside hitter, she was named to the all-tournament team. Last season Stokes led the Bruins with 439 kills. She will play at LSU.

Wil London | *Waco, Texas* | *Track and Field*

London, a sophomore at Baylor, anchored the U.S. to gold in the 4×400-meter relay at the U-20 worlds in Bydgoszcz, Poland. He closed a 10-meter deficit and took the lead with 50 to go, as the Americans beat Botswana by .42, in 3:02.39. London's split of 44.82 was the second-best in the field. He also earned silver in the 400 (45.27).

Kristen Baldwin and Noah McCormick
Windermere, Fla.; Dundee, Fla. | *Waterskiing*

Kristen, a freshman at West Orange High, won the 13-and-under slalom, jumping and overall titles at nationals in Caldwell, Idaho. Noah, a freshman at Winter Haven Christian School, won the boys' division and also picked up titles in slalom and tricks.

Nominate Now

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

ARTY POMERANTZ/NEW YORK POST/PHOTO ARCHIVES, LLC/GETTY IMAGES (COLEMAN); DARREN SIMS (ZAMUDIO); JEFF HOFFMAN (HOFFMAN); ROBERT AVERY (SCHOPPE); CHRIS PARENT/LSU ATHLETICS (STOKES); BAYLOR ATHLETICS (LONDON); BRENDA BALDWIN (BALDWIN); SUSI MCCORMICK (MCCORMICK)

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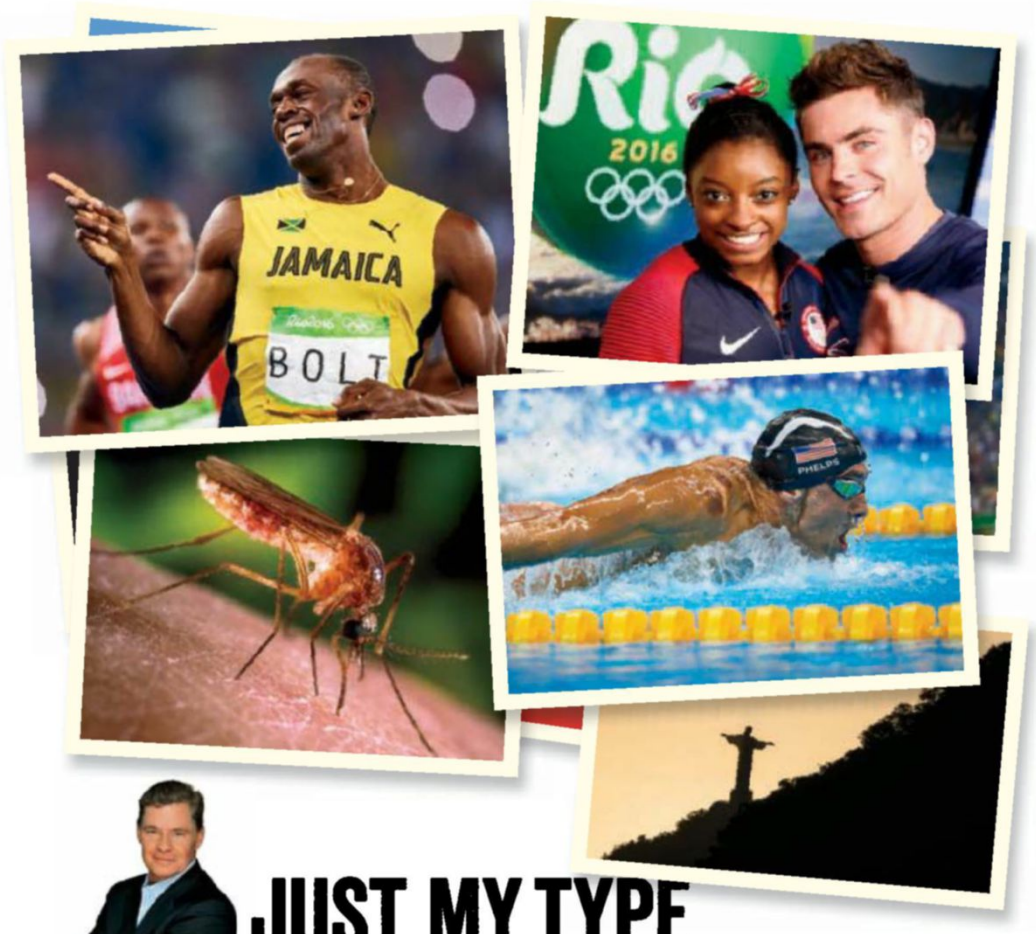


JUST MY TYPE

→ *by* DAN PATRICK

RIO REMINISCENCES

For spectators, the thrill of the Games and the spontaneous celebrating of the Cariocas in the Olympic host city were far more infectious than Zika—and the sight of Usain Bolt in full flight wholly unforgettable

ON RIO: I had the same concerns as everyone else. If you read everything in the papers, you would never come down here. I tried to reserve judgment. The Brazilian people have exhibited a lot of pride in showing off their country. A parade or party can happen at any given moment. You can look over at the next table in a restaurant and all of a sudden four people will get up and start dancing. I didn't necessarily join them, but it's been great.

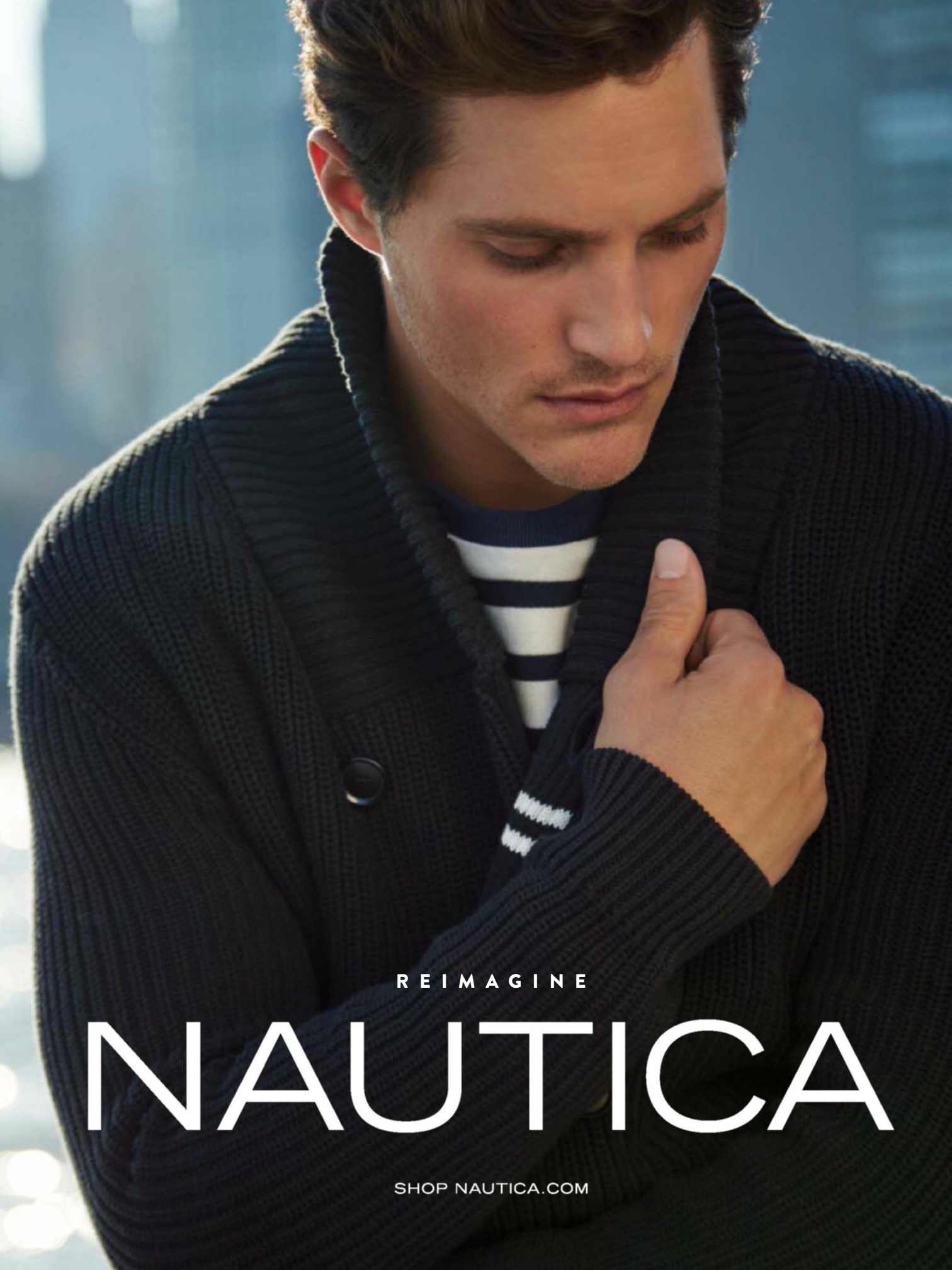
ON THE GAMES: As great as dark horses can be, the Olympics are like March Madness. We like Cinderellas and upsets, but in the Final Four we want the big names. We want to see the greats be great, and the interest in the biggest names is what ultimately drives coverage. Unlike some sports where we want to see dynasties crumble, it was gratifying to see the Phelpses and Bileses of the world dominate.

ON USAIN BOLT: One rule change in track I didn't like? One false start and you're out. What if that had happened to Usain Bolt? Would they really disqualify Usain Bolt in the 100 meters for one false start? It's not consistent with the Olympic spirit, which is everyone should be able to compete. When we saw runners get booted for false starts, it felt wrong. Still, TV doesn't do Bolt's speed justice. With high-definition and all the advances in technology, watching sports on a screen is great these days. But I tell people, if you get a chance to see him run live, that's one event you have to go to. Someone asked if competitors had a problem with his celebrating after he smokes these guys. I say, if you don't like it, beat him. Run faster. He reminds me of [Panthers quarterback] Cam Newton last season: If you don't like his end zone celebrations, don't let him score. Some have wondered if Bolt would do well in the NFL with his speed. I don't know if he would dominate the combine. Guys like Darrell Green or Deion Sanders might have beaten him in the 40. They're paid to be quick. Bolt is paid to be fast. It takes him a while to get to his top end speed but after 40 yards he would be waving to them as he passed.

ON ZIKA: Have I seen the Zika mosquitoes? Not many, maybe one or two. Pierre McGuire, NBC's hockey analyst who was down here covering the Games, noticed one buzzing right above my head and swatted it for me. I got lucky on that one.

ON CELEBRITY SIGHTINGS: I ran into Zac Efron, who was on his way to surprise Simone Biles, which was very cool. I also saw *SNL*'s Leslie Jones, who thought I was Jim Lampley. □

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II (PATRICK); JOE MCNALLY (BOLT); TWITTER (BILES AND EFRON); DONALD MIRALLE (PHELPS); SIMON BRUTY (CHRIST THE REDEEMER); SMITH COLLECTION/GADO/GETTY IMAGES (MOSQUITO)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The Case for . . .

MLB at The Games

BY JOE SHEEHAN

WITH RIO IN the books, it's time to look ahead to Tokyo, where baseball is among the six sports, including softball, that will be added to the 2020 Summer Games. This presents a golden opportunity for MLB to grow—the most important issue confronting second-year commissioner Rob Manfred.

For all their well-covered pitfalls, the Olympics reach more people in more countries than any other sporting competition in the world. Online streaming could help make the tournament in Tokyo the most-watched baseball event ever.

To capitalize on that audience MLB must permit its superstars—as opposed to the usual collection of minor leaguers and college All-Americas—to take the global stage for two weeks. That would not only allow the likes of Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant (U.S.; *right*), Yankees ace Masahiro Tanaka (Japan) and Astros second baseman Jose Altuve (Venezuela) to represent nations where baseball is already popular but, more important, would also help build interest in the sport elsewhere.

Globally, baseball in 2016 is where basketball was in 1976, and aligning with the Olympic movement could jump-start the game. Somewhere out there is baseball's Manu Ginóbili or Dirk Nowitzki—it's now a matter of sparking their interest. In some corners of the world this has begun to happen: Twins outfielder Max Kepler is a native of Berlin; Royals outfielder Paulo Orlando hails from São Paulo.

Manfred has two options. The first, less disruptive, is to allow players to practice for and play in the tournament, starting the week before the Games open in late July, and simply miss their games back in the U.S. MLB might add extra off days during this time to lessen the impact on clubs that have sent players to Tokyo, and it would need to limit the burden any one team might suffer by capping the number of Olympic representatives from each major league team at, say, three.

The second, more radical way is for MLB to shut down for 17 days the way the NHL has for the Olympics since 1998. That would mean the 30 teams (and their regional cable TV overlords) would have agree to give up more than two weeks of games (and programming) in the summer, however. MLB already plays 162 games in 183 days and is hemmed in by cold weather on both ends. Baseball can't do anything about the tilt of the earth's axis (although maybe it's worth asking Mike Trout).

To make this work MLB would need to adjust its 2020 calendar. Dropping the All-Star Game is a start. (Home field advantage in the World Series can be decided by having the reigning league MVPs play rock-paper-scissors.) Then MLB can either cut back to a 154-game schedule or add doubleheaders to remain at 162. Any Olympic initiative will test the owners' willingness to take a short-term revenue hit in the interest of long-term growth, which could ultimately yield extra TV and merchandising income from overseas.

And they'll have to decide soon: The collective bargaining agreement expires on Dec. 1, so an accord on Olympic participation in '20 or changes to the schedule will have to be reached in negotiations that have already begun.

The global monolith that is the NBA can be traced back to the 1992 Dream Team. Baseball wouldn't suffer from the lack of competition that that year's basketball tournament did—the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Japan and Cuba would all be threats to beat the U.S. Baseball had a run of five Olympic Games, from 1992 to 2008, that ended in part because it lacked star power. If it's going to stick this time and have a seismic impact, the sport's best ambassadors need to be on the field. □

Globally, baseball in 2016 is where basketball was in 1976, and aligning with the Olympic movement could **jump-start the game.**

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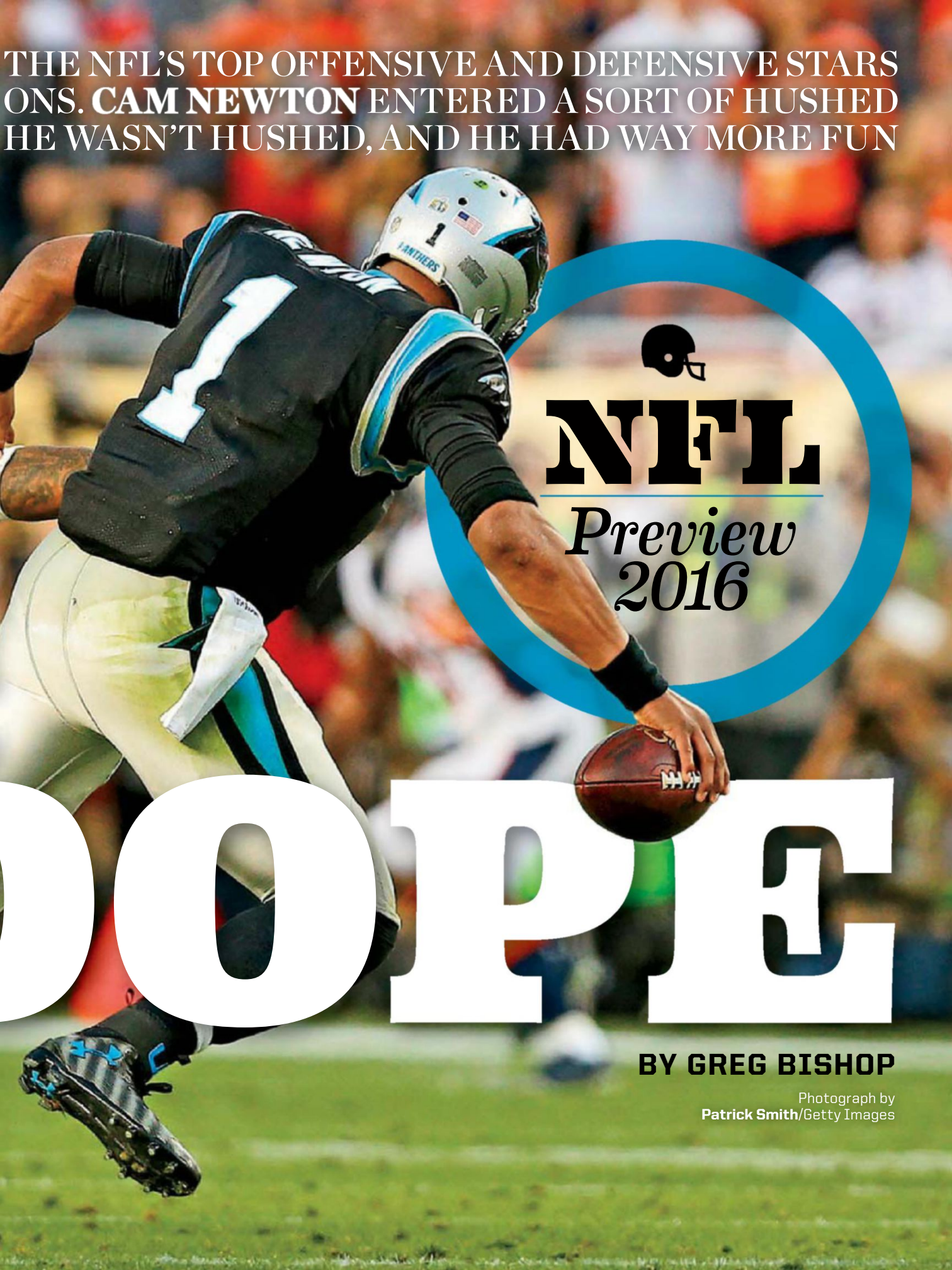
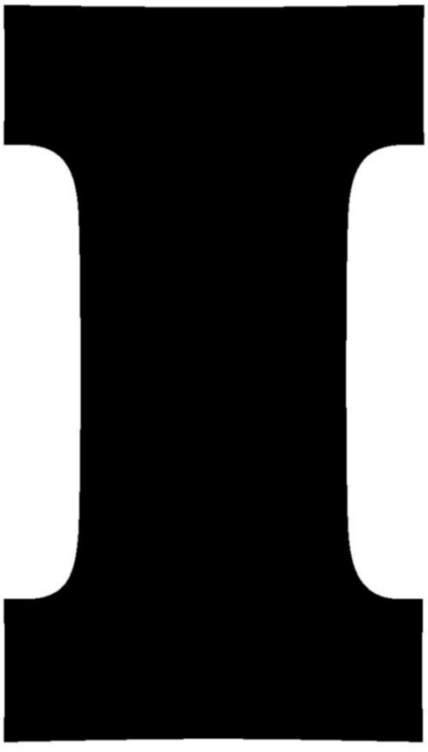


NFL
Preview 2016

DOPE

BY GREG BISHOP

Photograph by
Patrick Smith/Getty Images



KICKS, A HABIT
Miller's closet contains a pair of fresh sneakers for seemingly every day of the summer, including his Yeezys (bottom left).

THE KANYE STORY

IN FEBRUARY, early into the busiest, wildest, most jet-lagged off-season in NFL history, Von Miller flies from the NBA All-Star festivities in Toronto to New York City so he can appear on *Saturday Night Live*. The week before, he had delivered the Broncos' victory in Super Bowl 50, then partied all night with rapper Lil' Wayne.

Backstage at *SNL*, after assisting with *Weekend Update* and trolling his title game opponent with a digression on gravitational waves—"these waves are everywhere in the universe, just like I'm everywhere when Cam Newton closes his eyes"—Miller bumps into another rapper, Kanye West. The Denver pass rusher happens to have with him a pair of Adidas sneakers from Kanye's line, the Yeezy 750 Boosts, gray hightops with thick soles and various straps—the kind of shoes that look dreamed up by an astronaut on acid.

Miller asks for an autograph, but Kanye leans back against a wall, ignoring the football star until Kim Kardashian, Kanye's reality-star wife, intervenes. Miller retrieves a Sharpie, Kim hands it to Kanye, and the rapper signs the shoes without saying a word, as if he's welcoming Miller, in the most Kanye way possible, into the world of celebrity.

"His signature was terrible," Miller says. "But still: It was pretty dope."

Here is a partial list of other things Miller considers to be dope: the chickens he raises, private planes, gyrating sack dances, Michael Jackson, the grotto at Drake's home, meeting Kobe Bryant, glasses (yes, *eyeglasses*), French shoe designer Christian Louboutin, the National Geographic Channel, the basic idea of evolution, Barack Obama, Montblanc pens, hunting, orange soda, fur hats and tattoos of roosters.

Dope was also Miller's word of choice in describing his whirlwind off-season, the six months that vaulted him from elite football star to the pop-culture mainstream. In the afterglow of the Super Bowl he took 61 flights, visited 25-plus cities and accrued more than 71,000 air miles. He noted the 30-foot waterfall in Drake's backyard ("inspiring"), developed a crush on the model Gigi Hadid ("so normal") and stuck up for Johnny Manziel ("I'll be the last guy who stops being his friend").

Miller did 47 television appearances, ranging from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* to *Live with Kelly and Michael* to MTV's *Ridiculousness*. He presented at the Grammys (wearing a platinum suit jacket), visited the White House, cohosted a title-celebration concert with Rick Ross, purchased a $40,000 diamond grill for his teeth, appeared on *Dancing with the Stars* (he finished seventh), conducted the Hogwarts Express in Orlando, visited Six Flags Magic Mountain outside L.A. ("good ratio: seven dudes, 23 chicks"), and vacationed in Cancun, Las Vegas and Turks and Caicos. "I really didn't see myself doing all this before," Miller says. "I pictured retiring and raising chickens. Now I want to be like Michael Strahan. On TV."

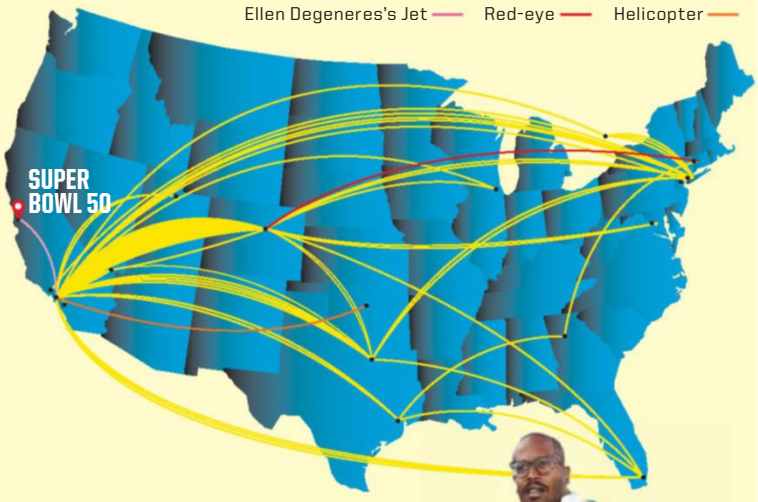
Yet throughout his summer among the stars, one thing nagged at Miller—one thing that *wasn't* dope. Despite being the No. 2 pick in the 2011 draft, despite his 60 career sacks and despite a playoff stretch last season that ranks among the most dominant in recent memory, he didn't feel sufficiently respected. His contract negotiations dragged on throughout the spring and into summer, and as Miller threatened to hold out (every other significant player from his draft class had signed an extension), he watched lesser players bank deals that surpassed his best offer. He'd been named Super Bowl MVP, but he did not receive a car (this year's sponsor, Hyundai, opted against it) or the usual trip to Disneyland. (That went to Peyton Manning.)

"Story of my life," Miller says, turning serious . . . if only momentarily.

THE FREE REFRIGERATOR STORY

IF WILL FERRELL were ever to make a movie about a cowboy-athlete and he wanted that character's house to look and feel as over-the-top as possible, he could simply replicate Miller's abode in the Denver suburbs, right down to the antler chandeliers. It's April, and Miller is home for a rare 48

ROBERT BECK



Moving Von

For the most part this summer, Miller Time was spent on the road, on planes and on-air . . . or so suggests his absolutely bonkers off-season itinerary BY LAINE HIGGINS

HIGHLIGHTS

2/9 **Denver** Broncos victory parade

2/10 **New York City** Kanye West fashion show, MSG

2/13 **New York City** *Saturday Night Live* appearance

2/14 **Toronto** NBA All-Star Game

3/7 **Denver** Peyton Manning retirement press conference

3/12 **Los Angeles** *Family Feud*

3/21 **Los Angeles** *Dancing with the Stars* premiere

4/5 **Los Angeles** SI Fashionable 50 cover shoot

4/16 **DeSoto, Texas** Von Miller Day

5/6 **Las Vegas:** *Michael Jackson One* Cirque Du Soleil Show

6/6 **Washington, D.C.** White House Visit

6/21 **Denver** Von Miller Pro Camp

6/24 **Los Angeles** *Madden* voice-over Shoot in L.A.

7/8 **Arlington, Texas** First pitch at Rangers game

61 Total flights

1 Red-eye

71,597 Total miles flown—roughly 2.9 times around the earth

47 Television appearances

16 LAX > DEN flights

25 Cities visited: Anaheim, Arlington, Atlanta, Beaver Creek, Bristol, Chicago, College Station, Cypress, Dallas, Denver, Desoto, Glendale, Hartford, Houston, L.A., Las Vegas, Miami, N.Y.C., Oklahoma City, Ontario, Pasadena, Salt Lake City, San Jose, Toronto, Washington, D.C.

hours, grazing among the mounted head of a 2,000-pound buffalo, various animal skulls, a leather saddle, an orange trucker hat that screams MAKE BIG SEXY GREAT AGAIN, a silver MVP trophy and, on the wall, an eye chart, gifted by Peyton's older brother, that reads:

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Miller is downstairs in his 3,800-square-foot basement, Drake's songs blasting so loud the walls shake. The doorbell rings. Miller bounces up and jogs past the arcade, the framed jerseys, the full bar, the pool and poker tables, and the Pop-A-Shot machine. Soon after, two deliverymen struggle to transport a coffin-sized box down the stairs. Miller rips open the packaging, revealing his very own Miller Lite refrigerator, customized with CLUB 58 printed across the top. That's what Miller calls his basement, after his jersey number. Club 58 is where he and his Broncos teammates party after games.

These are the perks of mainstream stardom, the free packages arriving from admirers and sponsors and neighbors and strangers, all of which Miller stacks outside his house. There must be 30 boxes, arranged in a giant square, a Rubik's Cube of untouched swag. The ones he's opened suggest that his admirers are both well-meaning and, frankly, a little strange. They send shoes, salami, posters, beef jerky, cheese, underwear, fruit. . . .

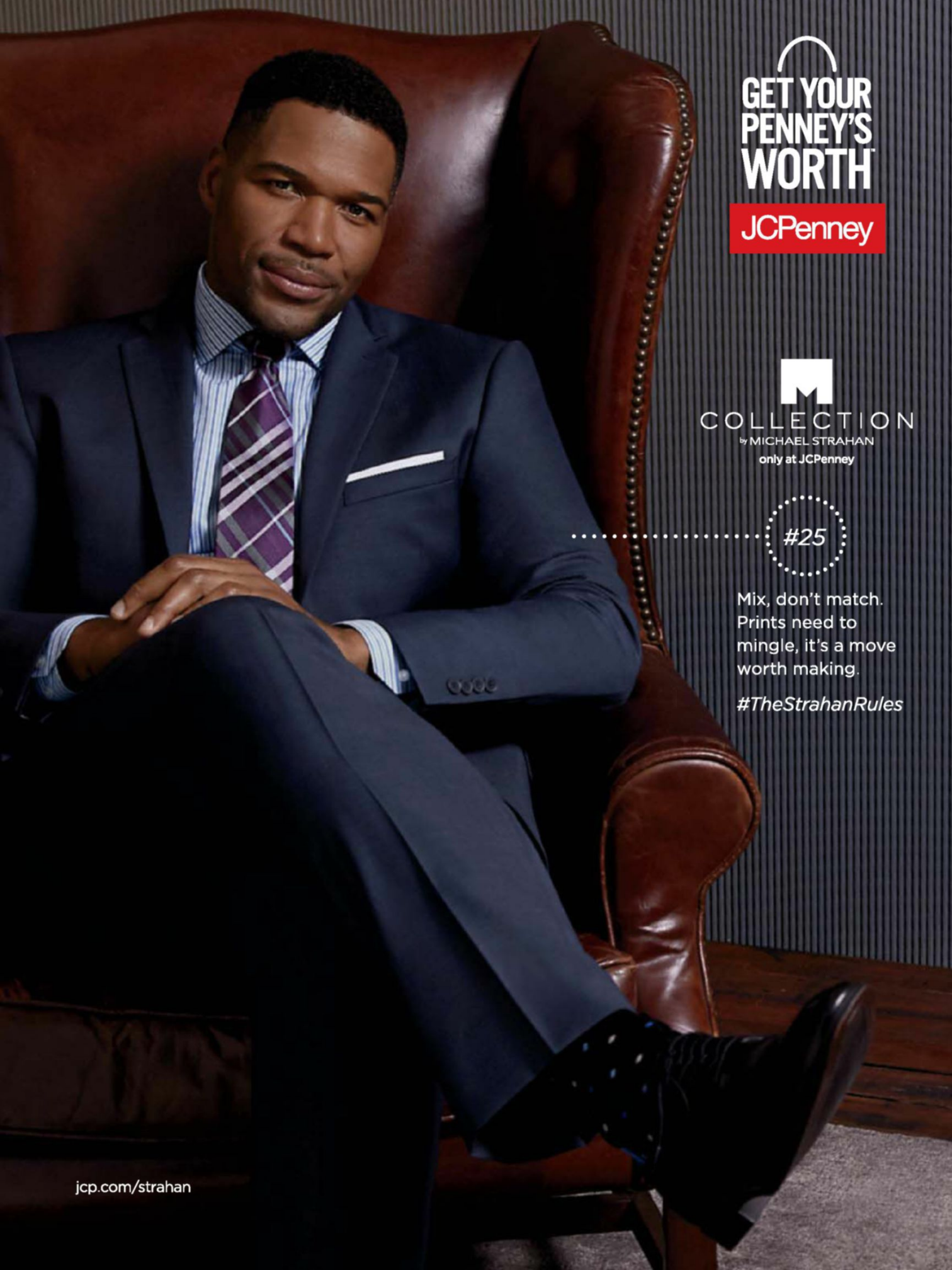
Von's younger brother, Vinsynzie (Vins, to most), has just turned 25, and after making plans for celebratory drinks, Von abruptly changes the subject. New topic: crabs. *Dope*, naturally. The deliverymen steal glances at each other; they're not sure what to make of this talk, whether they should leave. "Do you know that crabs have two different-sized claws?" Miller asks no one in particular. "Like, they got one claw for holding things and another claw for crushing stuff.

"The female crabs," he continues, "they're attracted to the biggest claws." *Pause. Smile. Laugh.* "Pretty typical, huh?"

To spend any time with Miller is to descend into the randomness of his most recent Google searches. His mind works like a *Jeopardy!* episode, bouncing between unrelated categories, each with its own bizarre facts. "I saw this documentary on the 10 most exotic animals," Miller says. "The dodo bird? *Dope!*"

There's more. "In 'Billie Jean,' did you know what [Michael Jackson] was talking about? Chicks saying he

PERRY KNOTTS/AP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got them pregnant—and he hadn't even met them!"

On time travel: "Say we create a spaceship that's moving at the speed of light and we fly around for a year. When we get back to Earth, Earth would've aged 10 years, but we've only aged a year. Think about that. If you can slow down time, why can't you speed it up?"

On chickens: "I own about 60. Those are my guys. I figured nobody's going to stop eating chicken anytime soon. I went to this farm in L.A. where they feed them exotic grass. I put *love* into my birds. I can see the logo for my company: me holding the chickens, big smile. The slogan, Happy birds!"

This was part of Miller's off-season, too, branding himself to wider audiences as less of a football player and more of a personality. He reinforced certain themes: his style (a cowboy-couture mash-up of designer sneakers, 10-gallon hats, ripped jeans and diamond-studded boots), his nerd-dom (oversized glasses, constant shout-outs to science), his widespread appeal (*DWTS*, for starters). . . . And it worked. Obama complimented Miller on his fashion choices. Strangers stopped him in airports to gush over his dance moves. He so dominated social media that *The Guardian* described him as "the closest sports Snapchat has to a house hipster."

Yet all that outside activity also raised the inevitable questions about whether Miller spent enough time focused on football. He did not participate in off-season activities, but he says that he worked out regularly at two gyms in Southern California, recovered inside hyperbaric chambers, and that he cut red meat, junk food and ice cream from his diet. "I never got too far away from football," he says. "The Von Miller you see on the field makes all this go."

Miller being Miller, he believes that his *DWTS* rehearsals actually helped him prepare for the coming season. Well, that and they cost him $4,000 in fines:

GETTING GRABBY
Miller's strip-sack of Newton in the first quarter of SB50 led to the Broncos' first score in a 24-10 win.

DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

$100 for each minute he was late and $100 for every fart he passed without warning, according to the rules established by his dance partner, Witney Carson.

At one fine-free rehearsal this off-season, Carson teaches him how to salsa, how to mimic Elvis's swinging hips and how to rip his shirt open on cue. "Be precise with your feet," says Carson, petite and blonde but still reminiscent of a football coach.

"It's all in the footwork," she says. "We plan. We practice. We execute."

Sweat drips down Miller's face. He smirks and says, "Ask Tom Brady about my footwork."

THE CHAMPAGNE STORY

ON JUNE 12 the Broncos receive their Super Bowl rings, which look like diamond Ring Pops. Miller arrives at the party accompanied by his parents, Von Sr. and Gloria, but without a new contract. He's never seen Peyton Manning "let his hair down" the way the QB does on this night, with adult beverages and the type of dancing that one might expect from a stilted signal-caller who turned 40 in March.

The party continues well into the morning at a club in Denver. Miller springs for 50 bottles of champagne at $200 per cork pop, and the bubbly sprays everywhere, blinding his eyes, soaking his underwear, damaging his cowboy boots. Receiver Demaryius Thomas breaks several bottles on the ground. "It got wilder and wilder," Miller says. "Fifty years from now I'm not going to remember all this contract stuff. It's not going to be about me and [Broncos general manager John] Elway. It's going to be about my relationship with these guys."

The next afternoon Miller is still in a reflective mood, although he's left the ring at home. "Too much champagne on it," he says. The party has him reminiscing, thinking back to 2013, the worst year of his life, and '15, the best one.

Miller missed the first six games of 2013 while on suspension for violating the NFL's substance-abuse policy, reportedly for trying to cheat a urine test. That cost him $800,000. He played the next eight games, racking up five sacks, and traveled to Houston in Week 16 feeling better than at any point that season. But the night before the game, out clubbing with a handful of teammates, Miller broke curfew. Coach John Fox found out and screamed at the revelers in a team meeting. Manning, Miller says, suggested that the coach send them home on the next flight. Instead, they stayed and played, and Miller's right knee

buckled as he tried to stutter-step between blockers in the first quarter. He missed the remainder of the season.

The Broncos made the Super Bowl without Miller, and some fans suggested that the team look into trading him. Meanwhile, Miller traveled to the championship game not with the team but with players' families, on crutches for his torn ACL, seated in coach. "I'm like, Damn, this s--- is terrible right here," Miller says. "They did me and Chris Harris [who also tore his ACL in the playoffs] like that." Seattle scored 43 points (34 of them against Denver's handicapped defense) as Miller watched from the sideline.

He returned in roughly nine months, smoothing over any lingering animosity with an Adrian Peterson–esque recovery and 14 sacks in his comeback season. But the Broncos again lost in the playoffs, this time to the Colts in the divisional round.

Then in December 2015, with his team playoff-bound again, Miller vowed that *this* postseason would be different. Taking a cue from LeBron James, he deleted all of his social-media apps from his phone. He visualized how he would play in January: freely, with maximum effort. He had long talks with Von Sr. about what he'd envisioned for himself, that he would intercept Brady, register a strip-sack in the Super Bowl and capture the game's MVP award.

Then the Broncos beat three of the NFL's best offenses—the Steelers, Patriots and Panthers, who scored all of 44 points in three postseason games combined. Before the AFC title game against New England, Von Sr. sent his son a text message: "I need five sacks." It took Von two games, but he did it. He did intercept Brady. He did strip-sack Newton in the Super Bowl, did win MVP—all of this after Von Sr. sent him another text message, in reference to Newton being picked ahead of his son, at No. 1, in 2011. "Remember the draft," Von Sr. wrote.

Miller's postseason highlighted a skill set among the rarest in pro football. "I remember watching him play dodgeball," says Dave Kennedy, Miller's strength coach at Texas A&M. It was "like watching *The Matrix*. He could bend so far backward that he could limbo under an 18-inch bar. . . . He had hips that moved like Michael Jackson when he danced. He was 6' 3", and in high school he ran hurdles!" What you saw in those playoff games, he says, "was a freak among freaks."

That postseason stretch reinforced for Miller what was possible. Early on in Denver, linebackers coach Richard Smith (who's now with the Falcons) used to ride Miller for not playing hard enough, for taking too many plays off. But last postseason, Miller says, he took no breaks. He wasn't worried about getting hurt or feeling tired. "All I did was bust my ass," he says. "It wasn't even that bad. I realized: I can do that every game.

"I can do that every year."

After the Super Bowl win in Santa Clara, Manning went to Disneyland and rode in a parade, an MVP perk in most seasons. "Typical," Miller says, rushing to add, "I'm not mad about it."

THE NAKED COWBOY STORY

IN PREPARATION for his various summertime photo shoots, Miller steps up his workouts to twice-a-day during one 10-day stretch in May. He counts calories. He eats salads. For the final 48 hours before modeling for *ESPN The Magazine*'s Body Issue, he doesn't even drink water, and he arrives on set with cartoonish muscles. He poses wearing only a cowboy hat, glasses and headphones, which isn't even the weird part.

That would be this: He brings Vins along. The photographer tells Von that she's never seen someone bring a family member to a shoot like this.

Miller's admirers are, frankly, a little strange. They send him shoes, salami, beef jerky, cheese, underwear, fruit. . . .

That's the Millers, the family that does everything together, goes everywhere together: charity events, football games, amusement parks, dance rehearsals . . . *nude photo shoots*. Von Sr. accompanies his boys to nightclubs and concerts. Gloria still does their laundry. Vins, who trained at La Cordon Bleu in Dallas, cooks everyone elaborate meals.

Gloria is her son's gatekeeper. She says she has missed just one of his events—a *DWTS* appearance—in his entire life, because she was attending a baby shower. Two weeks before Super Bowl 50, Von switched one of his two cellphones to airplane mode, blocking out the outside world. When he changed the setting back, one month after the game, he had 840-odd unread messages—from his jeweler, from Drake from Odell Beckham Jr. . . . He didn't bother responding. Those who *really* needed to get in touch called Gloria. "It's always: 'I'm so-and-so . . . Von told me to call you,' " she says. "I'm like, He *what*?!"

Senior is his son's conscience. He doles out advice interspersed with acronyms like LAF, for Life After

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ROBERT BECK; KELSEY MCNEAL/ABC/GETTY IMAGES; WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES; DANA EDELSON/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES; ADAM TAYLOR/ABC/GETTY IMAGES

CHIP SHOT
Miller, at his Club 58 poker table (left), foxtrotted on *DWTS*, cracked funnies on *SNL*, posed with POTUS and played the *Feud*.

Football. He missed many of Von's games growing up while he ran his own business, installing and servicing backup power systems, but he made every outing he could, even postponing surgery when he broke his leg and his collarbone in a motorcycle accident.

The Millers raised their children in DeSoto, a suburb of Dallas. The boys hunted deer, squirrels and rabbits. They loved sports. One cousin, Patrick Lincoln (who Von affectionately refers to as Uncle Potbelly), says he remembers Von grabbing an 80-pound floor jack with one hand and dragging it from the garage to the end of the driveway. He was three.

Another story stands out as the only time the Millers weren't entirely united. Von was entering the fifth grade. His father had forbade him from playing football, but while Senior put half a million miles on the company trucks, traversing the five states in which he conducted business, Gloria snuck her son onto the field. She kept Von's equipment in her Suburban, washing it whenever her husband was away, until one day Senior went to clean the car, opened the trunk and out spilled shoulder pads, a helmet and a jersey. "I didn't do it," Gloria says now, laughing. "It wasn't me."

It was Von's uncle Derrick Lusk who put him at defensive end and told him to do just one thing: Chase quarterbacks. (Von took that directive too literally on his first ever snap, tackling the QB after a handoff.) "Tom Brady should blame me," Lusk says. "I let that tiger out of his cage."

DeSoto High was stacked with future college football players, guys like Tony Jerod-Eddie (now with the 49ers) and Cyrus Gray (Falcons), and at various points they lived with the Millers. Every day felt like a sleepover. Later, they all went to Texas A&M together and lived in the same complex, driving around town, bumping Lil' Wayne. "A&M really wanted me," Miller says. "You know that girlfriend that's really not that attractive but she's going to do everything she can to keep you? That was A&M. . . . That hot chick that just talks to you on Mondays? That was LSU."

Only Miller hit his first real snag in College Station. His grades dipped, and his coach, Mike Sherman, considered moving him to fullback. Sherman suspended Miller for the spring game before his junior season, and Miller loaded up his 1981 Chevy Silverado pickup and sped toward home. He didn't make it 30 miles before his father called. "Pull that truck over, buddy," Senior said. "That's not how we are as Millers."

Von racked up 17 sacks that next season, in 2009. "*Dope*," he says. "I had to take the hard way.

"Story of my life."

THE FLETCHER COX STORY

IN LATE June the Millers arrive at Denver Autographs, a memorabilia store inside the Colorado Mills mall. Von has 1,000 items to sign before his private jet leaves for L.A., his base for most of the off-season. He scribbles various inscriptions on helmets, deflated and inflated footballs, posters, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED covers and jerseys. Two Sharpies run out of ink.

While Drake raps over a portable speaker, the store's owner, Ed Emmitt, dishes about athletes and autograph sessions—like the time Newton signed and then accidentally left his Heisman Trophy behind. Or the time Marshawn Lynch came by and consumed an entire plate of chicken wings, dropping the bones onto the floor, his Sharpies covered in buffalo sauce. Or how Elway's gardener had tried to sell him the quarterback's game-worn Super Bowl jersey before admitting it had been stolen.

Miller's session is anticlimactic in comparison. He discusses his image on social media, where fans call him greedy because they don't understand (or care) how NFL contracts work. The Broncos' best offer at this point is roughly $39.8 million guaranteed, or $20 million less than what the Dolphins gave Ndamukong Suh last year . . . or $12.7 million less than the Chiefs allotted Justin Houston, who plays the same position as Miller, in the same division. Miller believes Denver is disseminating information to reporters in order to make him look bad. "I got feelings too," he says. "Andrew Luck hasn't signed yet, but the Colts haven't leaked anything. It just feels weird. That's a move they didn't have to make."

As Miller signs, his autograph increasing the value of each item by $100 to $350, Drake continues rapping in the background about ex-girlfriends

and about how much fame blows. His words console Miller, who bobs his head along: *"We've been living on a high/They've been talking on the low/But it's cool/Know you heard it all before. . . ."*

Afterward, on the way to a second signing session, hail the size of golf balls bounces off Miller's ride as his phone pings with a news alert: Fletcher Cox, the Eagles' well-regarded defensive tackle, has completed a six-year, $102.6 million extension, with up to $63.3 million guaranteed. Miller's face drops. He strays from his talking points, shifting away from his perpetual positivity. "He went to, what, *one* Pro Bowl?" Miller whispers, adding, "I'm not hating." He flips through his phone, stewing as he studies the details of another contract that isn't his. He receives a text message from one of Cox's agents: "You're going to f------ love me." And it's true, Cox's deal has upped the market for the league's best defensive players. "I guess I'm not on that level, huh?" Miller asks. I just won a Super Bowl. . . . But it's cool."

Asked if he thinks Cox's contract will make Elway nervous, Miller says, "He should be happy, right? It's not coming out of *his* pocket. [Broncos owner] Pat Bowlen made [John] the highest-paid player in the league. *Twice*." He says this all while signing pictures of himself sacking Newton, holding the MVP trophy, confetti falling around him.

He's asked about his relationship with Elway, and he shifts back into Von mode, unable to resist a half-serious joke. "We're like Birdman and Lil' Wayne," he says, referencing the feud between the two rappers, the former holding a position of power over the latter at Cash Money Records, which Birdman owns. (Elway, when asked about the comparison, says, "The only Birdman I know played for the Celtics.")

The linebacker pivots again: "I still love Elway. He brought me in. I was his first draft pick."

Bottom line: Miller's stalled negotiations have become a distraction and a source of stress. They've also deepened a complex about the respect he believes he's owed but not granted, the doubts creeping in about how the Broncos actually feel about him. He says he will not, under any circumstance, play this season under the franchise tag. "It's like *Jerry Maguire*," he says. "I've got a family to feed, Jerry!"

Outside again, the hail subsides and the sun peeks through the clouds. Miller is headed to the airport, and as his SUV speeds away, he can't believe what looms front and center in the distance: a freakin' rainbow.

MUM IS THE WORD

Gloria, Von's chief supporter from Day One, met her son on the field in Santa Clara, kicking off a summer of savoring.

THE CAMP STORY

THE DAY before the Broncos' first practice of training camp, in late July, Elway summons Miller to his office. A few weeks earlier Miller had called Elway and Broncos CEO Joe Ellis, asking to speak on a more human level, removing his agents, steering clear of numbers. Soon after, on July 14, the linebacker scrawled his most important signature this off-season on a six-year, $114.5 million contract with up to $70 million guaranteed—the highest guarantee for a non-quarterback in NFL history.

This meeting marks the first time the two men have been in the same room since finalizing that agreement. Miller says he hopes to play the rest of his career in Denver. Elway stresses his own experience as the Broncos' highest-paid player, warning Miller of what he should expect in the locker room. "You're one of those happy-go-lucky guys who wants everyone to be positive," Elway says. "But you're going to see different sides of people because of what you make and because of the expectations [in Denver]." Elway then clarifies those expectations. "This is about creating your *legacy*," Elway says. "You should be a first-ballot Hall of Famer."

"No doubt," says Miller, who now addresses his general manager as "Mr. Elway," six weeks after he drew heat for cropping him out of an Instagram photo at the White House (on accident, he says).

Miller hates comparisons, but he can't avoid them. Elway says Miller reminds him of late Chiefs linebacker Derrick Thomas, a Hall of Famer. Coach Gary Kubiak points to Lawrence Taylor, a pass-rushing force many believe to be the best defensive player ever. "Von can be as good as Von wants to be," Elway says.

One day after the meeting the Broncos open training camp to begin their title defense. Questions remain: uncertainty at quarterback, injuries that have sidelined starters (Aqib Talib, from a gunshot wound; DeMarcus Ware, with a bad back) and a patchwork offensive line. Pundits are picking Kansas City to end Denver's string of five straight division titles.

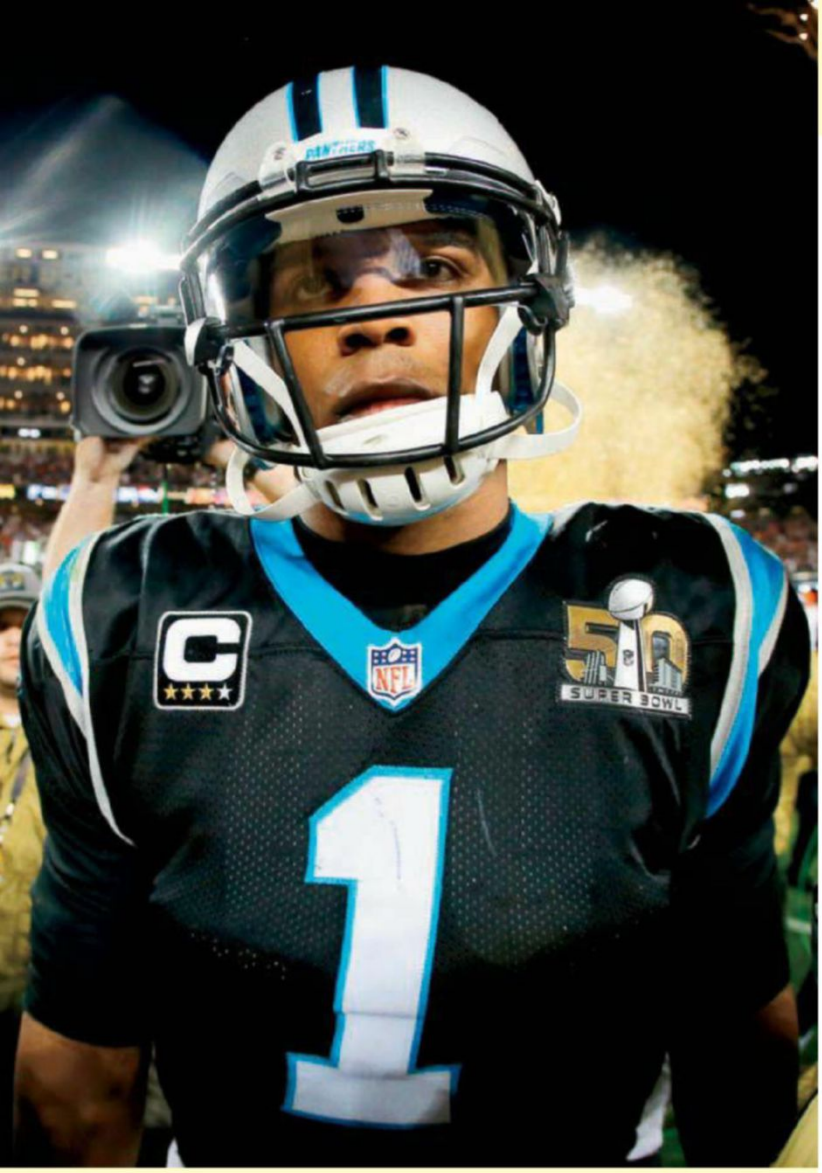
Miller shrugs. "It's been like that my whole career," he says. He doesn't splurge on anything with the contract—"What am I supposed to buy, a spaceship?"—and he shuts down his schedule as the new campaign approaches. The best off-season in NFL history has come to an abrupt end.

"What could be better than this?" Miller asks, gesturing toward the practice fields, his parents and brother standing 20 feet away. He answers his own question. "O.K. Defensive Player of the Year, another Super Bowl, moonlight at tight end, return some punts, raise some chickens, the next Michael Strahan. . . ."

He laughs.

"I want all that dope stuff." □

JAE C. HONG/AP



Newton's LAW

SO WHAT IF HE WAS A VIRTUAL RECLUSE THIS OFF-SEASON? THE FIRST THING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE PANTHERS' QB IS THAT HE'S NOT GOING TO CHANGE FOR ANYONE

BY GREG BISHOP

Photograph by
Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

HERE'S THE thing about Panthers quarterback Cam Newton: Even during practice, he performs. There he is in August, white bandana unfurling from his helmet, number 1 jersey rolled up to his chest. He's screaming, darting, chest-tapping, fist-pumping, high-fiving, dancing, smiling, throwing, frowning—and it's only the first week of training camp.

If anyone expects the famous Newtonian exuberance to be muted after his lackluster outing in Super Bowl 50, it's not. Think his confidence might be dented by the vitriol that followed that game? It isn't. He's as demonstrative as ever. If he's thinking even a little about last season—the championship he lost, the fumble he didn't chase, his infamous post-title-game poutfest—he hides it well.

Newton's approach wasn't universally adopted by the Panthers. Some did look back, like Coach Ron Rivera, who spent part of this spring researching why no team in more than 20 years had returned to the championship game after losing it the year before. (Buffalo did so in the 1991, '92 and '93 seasons.) Rivera made several phone calls to friends who had lost Super Bowls and a culprit emerged: complacency. He wouldn't have to worry about that with Newton.

Last season the quarterback was anything but complacent. Newton won over even casual sports fans with a transcendent style best described in terms like *joyful* and *exultant*. After touchdowns he handed footballs to children in the stands. He developed a show for Nickelodeon, *All in with Cam Newton*. Then he stomped away from his Super Bowl presser after two minutes and 29 seconds, and so much of the goodwill he generated in 2015 evaporated.

Publicly, Newton said little about the 24–10 loss or how it ended, with the league MVP being branded the sorest loser in sports. But privately Newton received advice from mentors like Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon. They've known each other since 2010, Newton's Heisman Trophy–winning season at Auburn.

Moon reached out first, expressing his displea-

sure in a two-paragraph missive hours after the Super Bowl ended. Moon told Newton his actions threatened to derail a season in which Newton had cemented himself as one of his generation's best players, a quarterback unlike any who had come before, in skill, style and temperament. Moon knew how Newton's behavior would resonate, even though—let's be honest—Newton had every right to be disappointed. Still, it reinforced his reputation as the league's most petulant QB, prone to mood swings, fine with throwing parties for even minor successes but unable to handle a major loss.

TWO-MINUTE DRILLED Newton's surly, and brief, post–Super Bowl presser branded him a sore loser.

"Those were the things we talked about," Moon says. "How a quarterback should act. Getting rid of the Dab. Being steady. Managing his highs and lows."

If Newton changed at all, if he listened to Moon and others, it was not immediately obvious. In his first game after the Super Bowl, a preseason scrum against the Ravens, a simple interception return by a teammate overwhelmed Newton with excitement. He ran onto the field, drawing an illegal-substitution penalty, nullifying a touchdown. This was not a quarterback in control of his emotions.

"You live and you learn," he told reporters.

"We're moving forward."

"Next question."

THIS TIME last year Newton faced an entirely different line of questioning that focused on his recovery from the car accident that ended his season in December 2014. He had been driving to the Panthers' facility on an off day to watch film when his 1998 Dodge pickup collided with another car, rolled over at least twice and landed, smashed up, on its side. His parents, Jackie and Cecil Sr., drove straight from Atlanta to the hospital. Their son had two fractures in his lower back. "He could have been paralyzed," his father says. "He could have been dead."

Instead, Newton had "the best camp I've seen from him," says Derek Anderson, his backup. The accident, by all accounts, changed Newton. It freed him. Newton the performer would play and act exactly how he wanted to, caring even less what people outside his inner circle thought. Those closest to him think he realized how easily his career could come to an end.

Newton played unburdened in '15, and was seemingly in a world removed from a stolen-laptop incident at Florida (charges were dropped after he completed a pretrial intervention program), a college recruiting scandal (Cecil was accused of shopping his son to major colleges for cash but has denied that any money changed hands) and a 13–19 record in his first two NFL seasons. Last year Newton celebrated with elaborate routines, posing with his linemen, shooting imaginary baskets with his backups, handing out footballs like candy bars on Halloween. He turned a little-known dance from a rap video, the Dab, into a national obsession—and then a national annoyance. (No one needed to see Hillary Clinton, Andy Reid or Al Roker Dab.)

Sure, all that emoting led a parent or two to write critical letters to local newspapers and a handful of older (and mostly white) coaches to complain that Newton's antics violated some unwritten ethical code. But mostly the elation Newton exhibited won over those who had been critical of his past transgressions. They wanted to enjoy something, anything, as much as Newton seemed to revel in each play. His attitude

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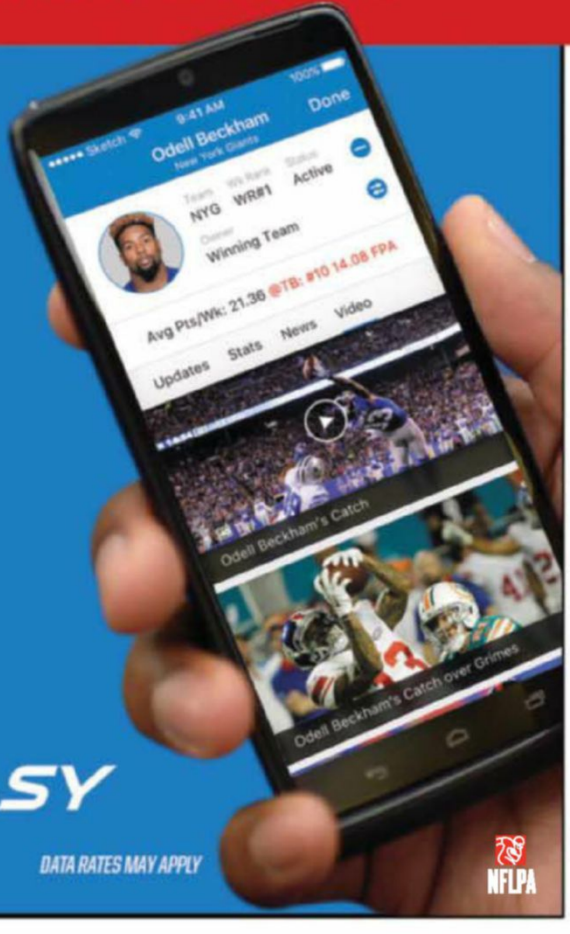

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IMAGE PROBLEM
Newton (1) didn't dive to recover the fumble forced by Miller (58), which further fueled the QB's critics.

became the season's dominant story line. The Panthers finished 15–1, and the football cognoscenti noticed. Joe Namath, a quarterback famous for his swagger, says, "Cam's style, that joy, speaks to his generation." Don Shula, who railed against excessive celebration when he coached the Dolphins and whose son, Mike, is the Panthers' offense coordinator, says, "It all seems positive to me." Even Moon, a QB so stoic that teammates called him Daddy Warren, says "I learned from Cam last season. My biggest regret is I didn't have as much fun as I should have. I felt like I was playing for an entire race."

It frustrates Moon that 15 seasons have passed since he retired from a career built on broken barriers, and African-American quarterbacks are still viewed through a racial lens. He says the criticism of Newton is at least partially motivated by his skin color, even though Newton told *GQ* this month he didn't feel he was being judged that way. Newton, Moon says, is unlike any previous black quarterback, from his flamboyant outfits (zebra-print pants, anyone?) to his refusal to conform to any idea of how quarterbacks are supposed to act. He is held to a higher standard than, say, Tom Brady or Aaron Rodgers, with every action dissected, every lapse blown up into national news. "That's the thing I don't understand," Moon says. "The way people react to Cam, you'd think he robbed a couple banks or raped a couple women. All he does is a little dance."

When asked about being a lightning rod for criticism in a pre–Super Bowl news conference, Newton said that was a "trick question," reasoning that he makes some people uncomfortable simply because he defies comparison. At 6' 6" and 260 pounds, he's built like a linebacker, only more athletic, faster and sturdier—a skill set so rare, his coaches at Auburn called him "the dinosaur." He's just as distinctive off the field, with the foxtails, the funky hats, the Superman swag. He doesn't look or act like a typical quarterback, and he's not about to apologize for what he calls "being true to myself."

Many in football find his approach refreshing—even Von Miller, the Broncos pass rusher who was last seen trolling Newton after ruining his Super Bowl. "Look at his stats," Miller says, meaning how good they are, and he is right. Newton is the first player in NFL history with at least 30 passing and eight rushing touchdowns in one season. (He had 35 and 10 last year.) He has the most combined passing and rushing yards in the first five seasons (21,470) of an NFL career.

"If you don't like him, you don't care about none of that," says Luther Campbell, a youth football coach and organizer, as well as an outspoken record executive who generated plenty of controversy as the front man of the hip-hop group 2 Live Crew in the 1980s and '90s. "I love him because he's not running away from his blackness, like a lot of other guys. They get successful, and they don't want to be black anymore. They want to be like Tiger Woods."

"People started to come around last year," Campbell continues. "You know why? Cam is real."

THE NEWTON who showed up for the Super Bowl did not resemble his true self or any other version. He didn't score, so he didn't Dab, and he had no footballs to give away. The Broncos took a 10–0 lead in the first quarter without scoring an offensive touchdown, behind a field goal and Miller's strip-sack of Newton, which teammate Malik Jackson recovered in the end zone.

Anderson stressed the positives to Newton on the sideline, reminding him of the "lulls" Carolina had overcome in previous games. There was the comeback victory at Seattle, Newton's pivotal moment in '15, where he led two scoring drives in the final 8:08 to seal a 27–23 win.

Against Denver, there was no rally. The Broncos stalked Newton, harassing him into 23 incompletions and three turnovers. At halftime Newton told Anderson he was seeing the field well and felt confident about the game plan. But nothing changed in the second half. The image that endured was Newton, late in the fourth quarter, choosing not to dive on a fumble, as if the Broncos' dominance had forced him to second-guess himself.

After the game, reporters asked Newton at least 13 questions, which he answered with a hoodie pulled over his head, eyes narrowed. Eleven of his answers were delivered in three words or fewer. He bounced after that, leaving his teammates behind, and that changed the tenor of his season.

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Meanwhile, Anderson says, "I don't think everyone understands what's going on there. He's sitting right next to the Broncos, separated by a curtain, and he can hear them celebrating. He was frustrated. People don't understand the sacrifice, everything you go through to get to that point and come up short. It's hard."

Newton left the stadium and spent most of the next six months underground. Miller, Newton's Super Bowl foil who made what seemed like a million public appearances in the off-season, says he understands. "I don't get why people gave him such a hard time," Miller says. "How do you gracefully lose the Super Bowl? You shouldn't expect grace then."

Moon cringed when he saw the postgame episode on television. He thought back to his most difficult press conference, after Buffalo erased a 32-point deficit against Moon's Houston Oilers in a playoff game to complete the biggest comeback in NFL history, and how he had stood there, crushed but available, emphasizing that his statistics didn't matter, that they had lost as a team. He had acted, Moon says, like a quarterback.

"With Cam it goes all the way back to Auburn, back to Florida," Moon says. "He's not shy. He's not quiet about promoting himself. The thing I told him is, I don't mind the highs. But quarterbacks can't get that low. They represent too much."

Upon review, Newton's position coach, Ken Dorsey, says his quarterback's actions after the game graded worse than his performance during it. Newton had not executed poorly, Dorsey said, except for the turnovers, "critical errors" that played a major role. "I don't think what happened there diminishes anything he did last season," Dorsey says, perhaps wishfully.

STILL DANCING
He may have kept a low profile in the off-season, but when training camp started, Newton didn't miss a beat.

IT'S MAY, and Newton resumes work in the shadow of downtown Charlotte. He's still animated, still screaming, still dancing, running 50 yards across the field to celebrate one score. He meets with the Panthers' beat reporters, who have not spoken to him as a group since the Super Bowl. *Moving forward*, Newton says. *Focusing on 2016*. His answers are different now, more guarded, as if he's channeling Bill Belichick.

Newton made just a handful of public appearances during the off-season. He hosted a charity kickball game while wearing UGG boots. He sang "Nice and Slow" by Usher during a radio appearance. He penned a short tribute about Muhammad Ali for *The Players' Tribune*. He filmed the Nickelodeon show at an animal hospital, a basketball court, a BMX track and the White House, where he interviewed Michelle Obama. For Father's Day—the first he was celebrating with his son, Chosen, who was born last Christmas Eve—he went to a Target store in Charlotte and bought gifts for kids who came to get something for their dads.

The Newton the public didn't see was at the team facility more this off-season, after spending previous springs at Auburn to finish his undergraduate degree in sociology. He graduated in May 2015. "Cam has been pushing guys," says receiver Kelvin Benjamin. "Talking to guys, telling them to forget about last year."

Newton, his father says, will not change for those who want him to be less visible, less flashy. In sixth grade a teacher criticized Newton for talking too much in class, so Cecil made him wear dress slacks and a tie to school on Fridays. He didn't stop dressing that way when the punishment ended. He woke up early and ironed his shirts, and his classmates started coming to school in the same clothes. "He's always had a strong will to self-identify," Cecil says.

Those who spend any extended time around Newton say he cares little about celebrity, that it isn't fame that drives him. They weren't surprised by his quiet off-season and felt he would have been criticized regardless of whether he is outspoken or not. "Famous people get caught up in being famous," says Ice Cube, the rapper-actor who befriended Newton a few years ago. "Cam's not like that. He's himself, and he can't win. People hate that he's outspoken. But they hate the humble guy just as much."

General manager Dave Gettleman says critics overanalyze Newton, forgetting that he started just one year in college, in Auburn's simplistic spread offense. He arrived at an MVP season through four years of gradual improvement. "I don't think he's peaked yet," Gettleman says.

Moon says the Panthers have tailored their offense to Newton's strengths in recent seasons, calling for more deep passes and designed QB runs. As training camp approached, the text messages between Moon and his mentee continued. Moon emphasized balance, Zen. "He doesn't have to be perfect," Moon says, "but he has to decide how much of his emotion is productive." □

CHUCK BURTON/AP

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NFL Preview 2016

SECOND Nature

(Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love the Clock)

EVERY WEEK GAMES ARE DECIDED BY HOW COACHES MANAGE THE FINAL MINUTES. AND EVEN THOUGH ONE MAN WROTE THE BOOK ON THE SUBJECT, KILLER MISTAKES ARE ALL TOO OFTEN MADE—JUST LOOK AT THE LAST TWO POSTSEASONS

BY MICHAEL MCKNIGHT

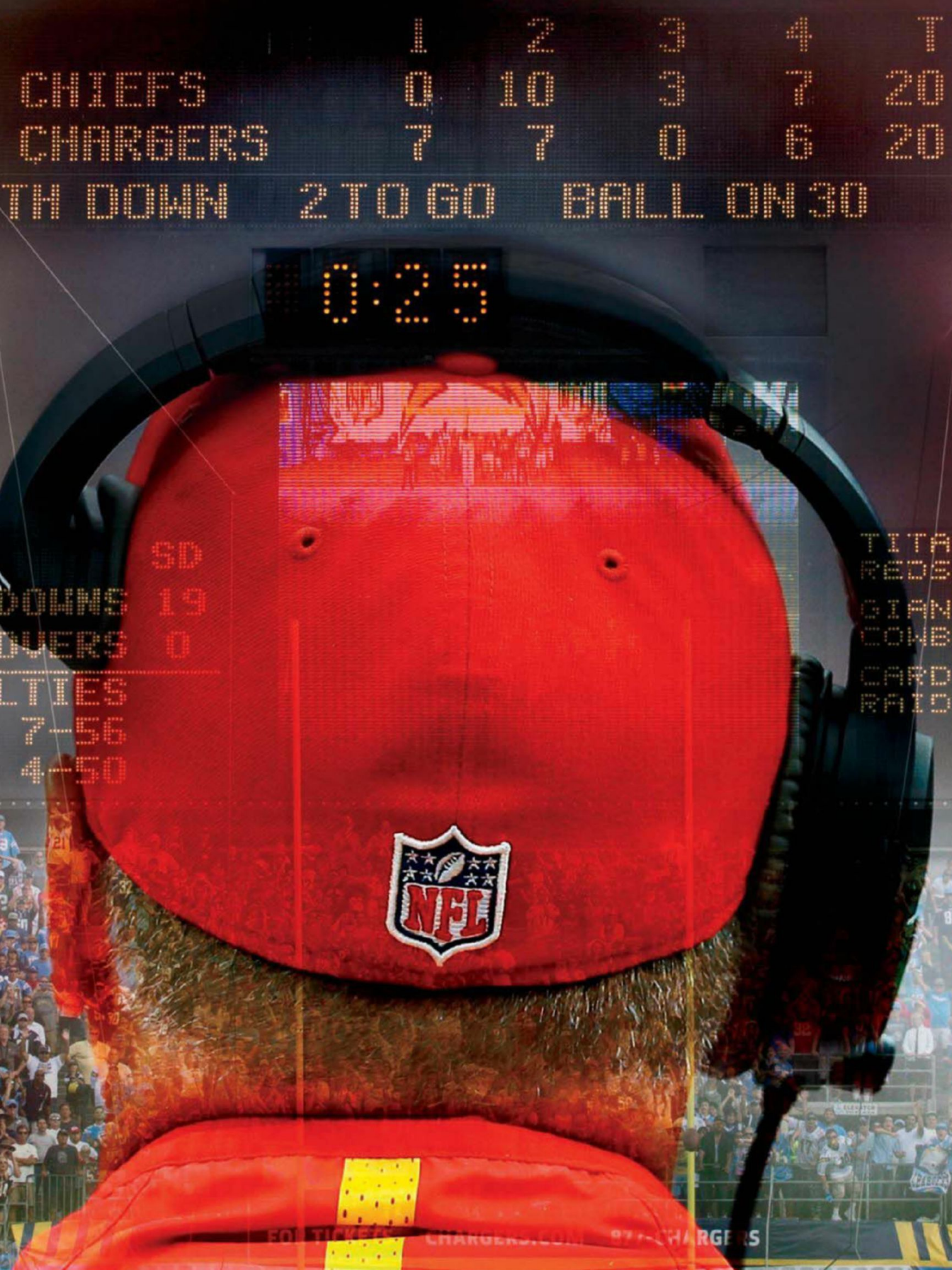
Photo Illustration by
SI PREMEDIA

Plays are precious; seconds are plays; therefore, seconds are precious.
—Homer Smith

If you lived on Enterprise Avenue in Tuscaloosa, Ala., around the turn of the millennium, you did not see much of the Smiths on fall Saturdays. True, Homer and Kathy hadn't had a free autumn weekend since roughly 1948, but now their lack of availability wasn't because Homer was on the sideline coaching college football (as he did for 36 years, plus one with the Chiefs). No, he was now busy hunting the game's most cryptic secrets.

An unknowing neighbor cracking open the front door would have found the married couple of nearly five decades scurrying up and down their stairs like figures in Escher's *Relativity*, carrying videotapes and yelling things like, "Is Tech over?" and "You gotta watch Florida before half!"

AARON M. SPRECHER/AP (COACH); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (SCOREBOARD AND FIELD)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CLOCK MANAGEMENT

The humble VCR, it turns out, enabled the most astute clock manager in the game's history to publish his *Odyssey* in 2004. Homer Smith called it *The Complete Handbook of Clock Management*, and if today's NFL coaches are to be believed, copies of his book, in its sixth printing, lie somewhere in the headquarters of every team. It's a survival tool. The book's opening words:

"The playing of football is at its best when players accept responsibility for the playing. When one player blames one coach for one problem, the playing is not at its best. The managing of the clock is at its best when coaches accept responsibility for the managing. When one coach blames one player for one problem, the managing is not at its best." Just because it's written in relatable prose, however, doesn't mean the message is taken to heart.

Smith coached at West Point mostly during the post-Vietnam years of 1974 through '78, an uneasy time when the Academy was associated more with napalm and civilian casualties than with Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard—a time when the advance scout at archrival Navy was a man named Steve Belichick. Had Smith still been among us two years ago, he would have had a field day with the most recent championship won by Steve's son, Bill—the game that today's coaches hold as the singular example of all that can go wrong, and right, when wrangling with the clock.

Surely Smith would have focused on the final 2:02 of Super Bowl XLIX, after Julian Edelman's TD put the Patriots up 28–24. He would have gushed over the Seahawks' first play on their next (and final) possession, a risk-free fade down the left sideline to Marshawn Lynch for 31 yards, after which Lynch got out-of-bounds. He would have cringed, though, at the timeout Russell Wilson called after the ensuing incompletion, when the play clock had been allowed to approach zero.

Smith would have taken little issue with the next two plays, a deep shot that fell incomplete and an 11-yard completion on third-and-10. But the following one, a juggling grab at the Pats' five by Jermaine Kearse would have brought Smith out of his seat—not for its impressiveness, but because Kearse had the presence of mind to lunge toward the sideline to stop the clock. Smith would have been maddened moments later by the second timeout Seattle wasted on the drive, due to another inexplicable draining of the play clock.

It would have mattered little to Smith—other than the fact that Seahawks coach Pete Carroll played safety for him at Pacific in 1971—that the ensuing four-yard run by Lynch put Seattle squarely in control at the one, second-and-goal, one minute left, down by four, with the best short-yardage back in the game. This enviable position wouldn't have excused those two wasted timeouts, not in Smith's mind, although not even he could have imagined how crucial they would become. The following play has since been cited as an egregious error in play-calling (which it was), but Wilson's fateful slant pass, intercepted at the goal line by Malcolm Butler, would likely have never been thrown if not for the Seahawks' regrettable management of the clock.

THE 2015 NFL season featured more games decided by seven or fewer points (131) than any season in history. And most of those outcomes can be directly attributed to clock decisions made in the closing minutes. Broncos assistant Joe DeCamillis, who coaches special teams for the reigning champs and aids in their clock management, was asked recently whether outsiders have any idea how hard it is to grasp the infinite scenarios presented by the clock, the score and the game situation—and then to make pressurized, split-second decisions. "No," he replied, laughing. "I was talking about it with my father-in-law. The closest comparison we could come up with was an air traffic controller. You've got a thousand things going on, you're watching 20 planes. . . ."

Certainly the stakes are higher in that setting, but air traffic controllers don't work under the scrutiny of tens of millions of eyeballs. "You can prepare yourself," says Darren Rizzi, the Dolphins' assistant who'll help new coach Adam Gase with clock-related decisions, "but the unpredictability is why I don't think anyone can ever truly master it. Even the best coaches have made mistakes."

Other coaches compared clock management to surgery or giving birth or even a person's final days. In his book Homer Smith listed eight ways that managing the clock is like a pilot's handling a mid-flight Mayday. The last one: "In neither can you make a major mistake and survive."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES; AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES; AARON M. SPRECHER/AP; STEVEN SENNE/AP

SMITH GREW up in Omaha, the son of a car salesman. Football, he told SI in 1980, "was all I thought about from the seventh grade on." He squeezed in enough studying to get accepted at Princeton in '50, serving as class president his last three years and as an All-Ivy League fullback his last two. After a two-year stint as an Army officer, he earned an M.B.A. at Stanford.

"Stanford was his first coaching job, under Jack Curtice," recalls Kathy, who is 85 but sounds half that. "When he went to the Air Force Academy [as an assistant in 1961], that's when he got really interested in the clock." Upsets over highly ranked Washington in back-to-back years, due in no small part to Smith's control over the stacked lightbulbs at the center of the scoreboard, earned him an early reputation as a clock savant. He was vastly overqualified to be a coach, a job he didn't pursue in search of championships. Smith coached because he loved teaching and, as he admitted in later years, because the money was good.

Andy Reid earned $7.5 million last season, which is better than good, and yet the Chiefs' coach made clock-related decisions in 2015 that cannot be explained away by the task's complexity. Exhibit A is the game that ended Kansas City's season, a 27–20 division-round loss at New England. Trailing 27–13 with 6:29 left—needing two touchdowns to tie—Reid and his quarterback, Alex Smith, inched down the field, huddling as if it were the middle of the first quarter. The first three snaps tell the story of a 16-play, five-minute possession that would have made Vince Lombardi proud, but that did the Chiefs and their fans no favors:

On first-and-10 at his own 20, Smith scrambled for two yards, running out-of-bounds to stop the clock at 6:21. Not a bad result . . . *if* Smith had communicated the next play to his teammates and snapped the ball shortly after the ref swung his arm to restart the clock. Instead the Chiefs huddled, burning 23 seconds. The incompletion that followed wasn't terrible, either. It stopped the clock. But on the ensuing completion near the sideline, receiver Chris Conley fought in vain for extra yards and allowed himself to get tackled inbounds. A killer 26 seconds wasted.

And so it went, until K.C. struck pay dirt with 1:13 left and, having no other choice, lofted an onside kick toward Rob Gronkowski, who made the easiest catch of his career. Game over.

TIME BANDITS
Reid (above) watched his playoff hopes vanish as receivers went down inbounds, huddles lingered and Smith (11) wasted precious seconds.

An impartial review of that game tape reveals that if the Chiefs had run the same plays with the same results but quickened their pace in the ways that every coach knows, the TD that cut the lead to seven could have been scored with about 3:45 left. Maybe Reid's fatal flaw isn't clock management but an unreasonable faith in his onside kick unit. That loss to the Patriots was reminiscent of the drive Reid engineered versus the same team in the waning minutes of Super Bowl XXXIX. The main differences are that Reid's Eagles trailed by 10 with 5:40 left and that the New England tight end who fielded the onside kick was Christian Fauria.

It's easy to second-guess coaches. Social media even allows us to second-guess them en masse and receive instant validation from other second-guessers. It's also easier than criticizing players. Ripping Wes Welker for dropping that seam pass in Super Bowl XLVI against the Giants (Gisele, this means you), requires forgetting for a moment the myriad physical talents that Welker possesses (and 99.9% of his critics don't). Men like Reid and former Giants coach Tom Coughlin, on the other hand, are just old, unfit guys wearing facial expressions that don't always suggest they're Mensa members.

Reid might have been given a free pass for his mismanagement last January if he hadn't already been labeled a poor clock manager. We hunger to place the pedestaled elite beneath us, and as the original Homer wrote a couple of millennia ago, "Hunger is insolent, and will be fed."

Stanford professor David Eagleman studies time and the way we perceive it, and he has something to say on the dark art of second-guessing: "I think there are two factors here. First, the armchair quarterback gets to see [the perceived flub] happen, watch it unfold and think about it. He's not forced to make a rapid decision. The other issue is psychological. The way our brain works is: If the coach has three options to choose from and you, the fan, are 80% sure that Option A is the right call, when [the coach] calls Play A and fails, we tend to backtrack. 'Come to think of it, I was only about 50% sure.' This is true in every field, in every decision that gets made."

The 2015 season ended with lots of second-guessing. A few hours after Reid took his sweet time versus the Patriots, the Cardinals found themselves leading the Packers 17–13 with 2:34 left. Arizona's O faced second-and-eight at Green Bay's 22. The Cards appeared destined for a TD, or at least a field goal. More important, they could bleed the clock so Packers QB Aaron Rodgers would have too little time to respond.

Then Arizona coach Bruce Arians called for a deep pass that, when it fell incomplete, stopped the clock. After a Cardinals field goal, Rodgers used the extra 40 seconds Arians had gifted him—an Arizona run would have melted that time away—to set up a Hail Mary to Jeff Janis that sent the game to overtime.

Only Larry Fitzgerald's breathtaking catch-and-run in OT bailed out Arians, but not before the coach had been exposed as a man unvaccinated against the clock's venom.

TICK-TOCK JOCK

Smith, a Princeton fullback and coaching legend (right, at Army) put his life's work into a 2004 book on clock control.

COWBOYS COACH Jason Garrett was never a pupil of Homer Smith's, despite their shared standing as Princeton football's proudest sons, but he knows the legend. "I've been hearing about him since I was 18 years old," says Garrett. "The interesting twist is that [Coach Smith] was at UCLA right before [Cowboys Hall of Fame QB] Troy Aikman got there. Troy didn't play for him, but there are so many great stories from that time about [Smith's] devotion to clock management. The amount of time and effort they spent on it was unbelievable."

Smith had been lured back to UCLA in 1980 from Harvard Divinity School, to which the coach had escaped after a tumultuous firing at Army. He returned to the game with guns blazing, instilling in the Bruins a knowledge of the clock that one quarterback, David Norrie, still uses as a college football commentator on ESPN. "Homer was the greatest teacher, in any field, that I've ever come into contact with," says Norrie. Smith, he recalls, was never too far from his oversized wooden board, painted green and white, and accompanied by 22 triangles and circles, which he used to drill his students on situation after situation. One QB would man the stopwatch, another would keep track of down-and-distance and timeouts, and the third, Norrie recalls, "would get grilled." *Down two. Minute-30 left. Ball on our 10. One timeout . . . Up five. Three minutes left. Ball on their 30. . . .*

"I got to know [clock management] so well that by the time I became the starter my senior year, I didn't have to turn to [Smith]," says Norrie. "As Homer put it, 'David, you're flying the plane.' "

This informal postgraduate work of Smith's included reviewing videotapes of endgame scenarios around the country—the same practice that informed his book. "We had four or five VCRs running on different TVs throughout the house," Kathy recalls of the scene on Enterprise Avenue in the late 1990s. "I'd run up and down the stairs trying to record the last two minutes—before the half and at the end of the game—and he would analyze what they could have done better in clock management. He couldn't believe how many teams made huge mistakes."

Garrett has adopted at least one of Smith's doctrines. "The biggest thing we talk about [when reviewing film of clock decisions] is being honest," he says. "Independent of the outcome, did we handle this the right way? I coached under Nick Saban for two years, and that was something he always stressed. You've gotta be careful about saying, Well, it worked out, so we handled it correctly. You have to evaluate these things independent of the result. Then you institute [what you learned] in practice."

From Chapter 20 of Smith's book: "Without constant practice, the coaches will be nervous and undecided when mustering for the game; without constant practice, the head coach will be wavering and irresolute when the crisis is at hand. The previous sentence is a

paraphrasing from the strategy classic *The Art of War*, written by China's Sun Tzu—2,500 years ago. [Practicing] this stuff is difficult," he goes on. "If it is allowed to embarrass, it will be avoided. And the ones most vulnerable to embarrassment—the coach and the QBs—are the ones who can least afford to avoid it."

"A lot of coaches don't want to mess with [clock management]," says DeCamillis. "It's not a real sexy topic. It's not how coaches get jobs, being great clock managers. But this is where games are being won and lost.

"Guys still figure that if they put themselves in the right play, that's gonna win 'em the game. I don't think you can do that anymore, just run your plays and say, 'We're gonna whip these guys.' It feels like every game is a seven-point game or a three-point game headed into the fourth quarter. You better be good at this part of [the game]."

"I always thought [clock management] was a great way to start practice," says Dick Curl, a retired NFL quarterbacks coach who kept one eye on the clock for the Chiefs and Rams between 2006 and '10. "It gets guys moving and running and thinking right away. Maybe

RUSTY KENNEDY/AP (SMITH)

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the third night of training camp we'd go through it in our team meeting: 'This is what we're thinking in these situations.' And you always hope to get a two-minute situation in a preseason game [so you can] practice it live against another team. Sometimes we'd force it [even when a hurry-up wasn't called for], just to get a feel for it."

The Rams have the advantage of Jeff Fisher, whose lasting obsession with late-game scenarios has him leading a drill just for getting his offense off the field, and the field goal team on, in the blink of an eye: The offense runs closer to the goal line, and if two players collide, they've failed. (When performed recently at training camp, the kickless drill either impressed the throng of fans into silence, or confused them there.) Three weeks ago the veteran of 20 years as an NFL head coach, respected within the league for his clock prowess, stood slathered in sunscreen at Rams training camp and, from afar, shared some advice for the league's four first-year head coaches, former coordinators all: First establish a clear chain of command when it comes to clock management.

"What I've seen over the years is you have assistant coaches emerging into head coaching positions, and they remain coordinators. Managing the game, staying on top of the clock—it's not easy. . . . [You need to] make it easy on your play-caller. Instead of [him hearing on a headset], 'Hey, it's fourth down—let's go for it!' you need to have already thought ahead. 'It's third-and-one here. You've got two shots.' Then nobody panics."

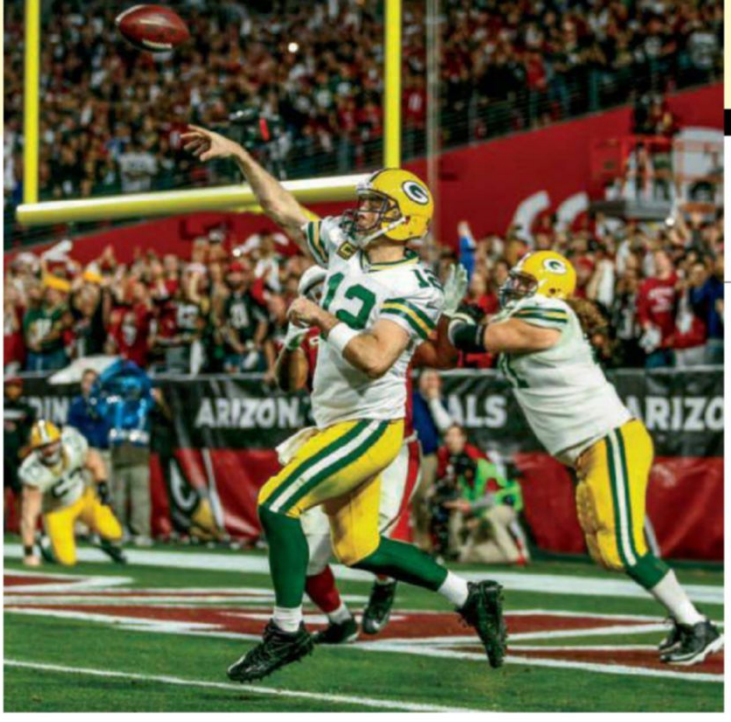
AND NOW New England has to think about taking a timeout." Those were Al Michaels's words as Lynch returned to the huddle after rumbling to the Patriots' one with a minute left in Super Bowl XLIX.

"By the book, Belichick should have called a timeout," says Rizzi, explaining that a stoppage would have given Tom Brady a few more seconds to respond to Lynch's imminent plunge into the end zone. "But he had a feel that he was gonna let it ride, that he had a good [defensive] call, and look what happened.

"I gotta say here that if Bill Belichick isn't the greatest NFL coach of all time, he's one of the greatest—but had they lost that game, he would have gotten second-guessed until the cows came home. My point: The good decisions are the ones that work, and the bad decisions are the ones that don't."

Funny. Reid wound up raked over the coals for conserving his timeouts against Belichick. "Words empty as the wind are best left unsaid," wrote Homer—the ancient Greek one.

As the clock ticked on in SB XLIX (*0:54 . . . 0:53 . . .*),



HAIL, YEAH!

Poor pacing by Arians (above) allowed for two long Rodgers heaves that nearly cost the Cardinals a playoff win.

Carroll didn't react to his apparent good fortune with his trademark grin. He looked instead like someone had tossed him an abacus made of butter. The tape shows Carroll working his gum, staring at Belichick, who was turned in profile to Carroll, wincing and saying, "What?" into his headset, followed by a quick glance upstairs, presumably toward his longtime game-management guru, Ernie Adams. "O.K.," Belichick said.

Maybe Adams uttered something prescient into Belichick's headset, something like *They're staying heavy; we're good*, or *They're lining up to run that pick*, or maybe just *Let it ride*. Maybe the Pats' course of action was decided during the timeout Seattle had just wasted. *They're gonna run it. When we stop 'em, we're gonna stay heavy and we're not gonna call time. Be ready.*

Maybe, somewhere under Belichick's sweatshirt, his gut was telling him there was no way Seattle could have prepared for the sudden arrival of this scenario within a scenario. *. . . 0:36 . . . 0:35 . . .*

Maybe Belichick and Adams were banking on the Seahawks' overthinking things—on Carroll and his coordinator, Darrell Bevell, figuring that a pass would bring either a TD or a clock-stopping incompletion that would save Seattle's lone remaining timeout. A slant pass into traffic? Given all that could have gone wrong, it's hard to chalk that one up to anything but the pressure of a clock that Seattle didn't expect to be ticking.

You can say the Patriots won the game on the next play—a miracle born of preparation and opportunism—but it's just as safe to say the call for a slant to Ricardo Lockette would never have been sent in if not for what Belichick did with the clock. Or rather, *didn't* do.

Alternatively, maybe he knew something that only a trio of obscure researchers knew.

In 2015 Nola Agha and two of her sport management students at the University of San Francisco—Bryan Beasley and Ryan Greenwald—published a study of the final moments of the 83 NFL games played between '09 and '11 that went down to the wire. Among the eyebrow-raising, counterintuitive nuggets they found—and this applies to Carroll, Wilson and Seattle's

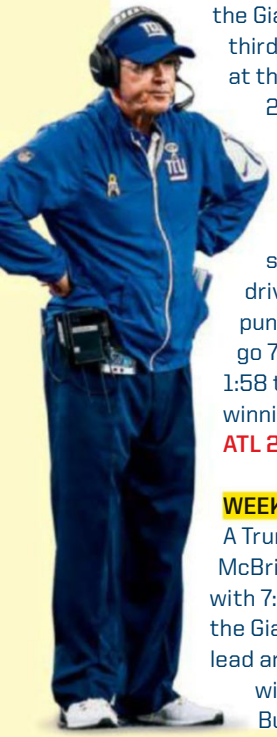
CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (RODGERS); RICK SCUTERI/AP (ARIANS)

Time Bomb

How crummy clock management ruined a promising season and undid a two-time Super Bowl–winning coach: The story of Tom Coughlin's 2015 Giants BY BEN BASKIN

WEEK 1 *at* Cowboys
With 1:43 remaining, leading 23–20, the Giants have third-and-goal at Dallas's one. Pro Football Reference pegs New York's chances of winning at 97.7%. The Cowboys are out of timeouts, but Eli Manning stops the clock with an incompletion. Had the Giants run or taken a sack, they could have milked 40 ticks; instead they kick a FG, take a six-point lead and give Tony Romo 1:29 to march 72 yards and win—which he does. DAL 27, NYG 26

WEEK 2 *vs.* Falcons
The Giants have the ball on Atlanta's 14-yard line with 4:27 left in the third quarter, leading 20–10. (Win probability: 97.6%.) On third-and-two Big Blue decide to pass, and Manning loses a strip-sack. Later, with 3:27 left in the fourth and the Giants facing third-and-seven at their own 39, up 20–17, they still have a 73.7% chance. But a delay-of-game penalty stalls their drive, and they punt. The Falcons go 70 yards in 1:58 to score the winning TD. ATL 24, NYG 20



WEEK 8 *at* Saints
A Trumaine McBride pick-six with 7:11 left gives the Giants a 49–42 lead and a 96.4% win probability. But Drew Brees leads the Saints on a 15-play drive in 6:35 to tie the game with 36 seconds remaining. Instead of running out the clock and playing for OT, New York throws three times, calls two timeouts and punts, leaving 20 seconds. After a Giants face mask penalty on the return, Kai Forbath kicks a 50-yard FG as time expires. NO 52, NYG 49

WEEK 10 *vs.* Patriots
With 2:06 left and the Giants on the Pats' five-yard line, trailing 24–23, they have a 71.5% win probability. If Manning kneels three times and New York kicks a FG, New England, with one timeout left (plus the two-minute warning), can stop the clock only on the first two downs; and Tom Brady can get the ball back with a little over one minute left. Instead the Giants throw incomplete on first and second down, stopping the clock, and Manning gets sacked on third. The Pats get the ball with 1:47 left and Stephen Gostkowski nails a 54-yard FG as the clock ticks to :01. NE 27, NYG 26

WEEK 13 *vs.* Jets
With 10:47 remaining and facing first-and-10 from the Jets' 12, leading 20–10, the Giants have a 99.2% win probability. But instead of running down the clock and kicking a FG, they pass on second and third down, leading to fourth-and-two at the Jets' four. The Giants then forgo the easy FG and Manning throws an INT. The Jets score 10 points in the game's final 8:42 and win in overtime. NYJ 23, NYG 20

burned timeouts—was that when a team calls timeout during a two-minute drive it doesn't conserve precious time; it somehow ends up costing the offense 13 to 22 seconds off the game clock. "The evidence suggests that it helps the defense regroup and strategize," says Agha. "It's possible that giving the defense a timeout," adds Greenwald, "enables them to shift from a reactive mode into more of an attack mode and muck up the offense's plans."

Is that why Reid clung to his three timeouts while his 2015 season slipped away? And speaking of Reid, Greenwald notes that critics of the Chiefs' coach overlooked the fact that his top wideout, Jeremy Maclin, had left the game against the Patriots with a high ankle sprain, and that K.C.'s final drive was conducted with a rookie and a second-year man at receiver—players whose knowledge of the playbook wasn't as deep as Maclin's, and who each ended up making critical errors in failing to get out-of-bounds.

Of course Reid couldn't defend himself after the game by pointing to any of that. Doing so would have painted him as a complainer who passes blame to his players, and that can get a coach fired too.

DeCamillis, Rizzi and their clock-managing peers each chuckle at the idea of a layperson watching at home—eager to offer his criticism after a play—being teleported to the sideline, having the shot-caller's headset plopped upon him, then imploding under the pressure like a supernova. As for those enterprising USF researchers, when asked whether they will deepen their research, they too laugh. "It depends on how much time we have," jokes Greenwald. Which brings us to the most important clock management of all.

The 76-year-old Curl and his wife, Beverly, retired to Mount Laurel, N.J., because their daughters and grandkids live there. Their fall weekends remain busy, and although Curl seems to have plenty of time left, he's not waiting until the final minutes to manage his life's clock.

Homer Smith's situation was more pressing. He learned he had multiple myeloma (a cancer of plasma cells) not long after completing his book. After six weeks of aggressive stem cell therapy at the University of Texas, Kathy went to check out of the Austin hotel room where she'd lived and prepared to drive her ailing husband home to Tuscaloosa, where Homer served two stints as the Crimson Tide's offensive coordinator. To Kathy's surprise, her four-figure bill at the Austin Residence Inn had already been paid by an NFL general manager and a college coach whose names Kathy declines to divulge "because they wouldn't want me to. It was their way of showing him how much they loved him."

RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES

NIT-PICKING
The role Carroll (left) played in the INT by Butler that ended Super Bowl XLIX: questionable clockwork that left Seattle with few choices on the goal line.

When one last hook-and-lateral attempt by doctors at Emory Hospital in Atlanta came up short, Kathy drove Homer home for the last time. Former Browns GM Phil Savage (who'd been hired in Cleveland by a third-year coach named Belichick) visited Smith on Enterprise Avenue and was told by his mentor, "I won't be here next Friday."

That's when Kathy called their two daughters and asked them to come over with the grandkids (including Taylor Hall, a quality control coach and, yes, clock management specialist at Princeton) to say goodbye.

The image of those descendants trudging up the same staircase that Homer and Kathy had traversed in researching their book, a volume that contains as much humility as hard-won wisdom (in one case study, Homer described a costly error by UCLA, noting, "the author was the offensive coordinator and QB coach"), calls to mind a line from the original Homer, who was hailed by the ancient Greeks as *protos didaskalos*, "first teacher": "There is a time for many words, and there is also a time for sleep."

At the very end, with his daughters at his side and his wife holding his hand, the 79-year-old coach had something, Kathy says, that any man who has ever been embroiled in one of football's time-intensive predicaments—any coach who has played the percentages and lost, or has followed his gut, only to get punched there—has too little of in such moments.

"He knew he had love." □

ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES (INTERCEPTION); ROBERT BECK (CARROLL)

NFL Preview 2016

Scouting REPORTS

Photographs by **Gregory Shamus**/Getty Images

THE 2016 NFL season feels a lot like where we left off in '15 when, by the tail end of the season, there were really only four teams you could envision winning the Super Bowl: the Broncos (12–4), Patriots (12–4), Panthers (15–1) and Cardinals (13–3). Denver nipped Carolina in Santa Clara, but if you played with variables like location (say, Foxborough instead of Denver) or injuries (Carson Palmer's balky index finger, for one), either of the conference championship games could have gone the other way. It was *that* close.

I don't see this season being much different, give or take a team. Depending on how injuries play out—that being the biggest determination of success—the Patriots and Steelers will be the class of the AFC, with Alex Smith's risk-adversity being the only thing keeping the Chiefs out of that elite group. In the NFC, absent injuries, I see the Seahawks, Cardinals and Packers battling it out for supremacy. Dallas is close, but it's not reliable enough on defense. (Sorry, Carolina and Denver: There'll be no Super Bowl rematch.)

Within that top five you're basically talking about coin-flip games. Each team gives pundits reasons to gush; each team has potentially fatal weaknesses that will keep its coach awake at night.

The Steelers have a star running back, Le'Veon Bell, who's suspended three games for violating the NFL's drug policy; they have a promising receiver, Martavis Bryant, who'll miss the entire season for the same issue; and their big-ticket free agent, tight end Ladarius Green, still hasn't practiced because of either an ankle injury or recurring headaches—depends who you ask.

TWILIGHT 'ZONA

With weapons like Fitzgerald, who's enjoying a late renaissance, the Cards can win it all.

Greg A. Bedard's Division Standings

AFC

EAST

Patriots (1)	12-4
Bills	8-8
Jets	8-8
Dolphins	7-9

NORTH

Steelers (2)	11-5
Bengals (5)	10-6
Ravens	8-8
Browns	1-15

SOUTH

Colts (4)	8-8
Texans	8-8
Jaguars	7-9
Titans	3-13

WEST

Chiefs (3)	11-5
Chargers (6)	10-6
Raiders	9-7
Broncos	9-7

NFC

EAST

Cowboys (4)	10-6
Giants	8-8
Eagles	7-9
Redskins	7-9

NORTH

Packers (3)	11-5
Vikings (6)	10-6
Bears	6-10
Lions	5-11

SOUTH

Panthers (2)	11-5
Falcons	7-9
Buccaneers	6-10
Saints	6-10

WEST

Seahawks (1)	12-4
Cardinals (5)	11-5
Rams	6-10
49ers	3-13

NUMBER IN PARENTHESES: PLAYOFF SEED

Meanwhile, Pittsburgh continues to trot out a "how-are-they-going-to-cover-anyone?" secondary.

The Patriots enter the season where they left off, with an unsettled offensive line and an inability to rely on the running game when opponents (like the Broncos in last year's AFC title game) dare them to. They'll be dangerous if they nab home field advantage, but that became perhaps too tough a challenge when Tom Brady was suspended for the first four weeks, including the season-opener in Arizona.

IT'S IN THE CARDS

Palmer's 2015 season suggests he has a title run in him; he just has to shake off some postseason rust—and stay healthy.

In the NFC the Seahawks have all the pieces except on the offensive line, which is somehow even more of a jigsaw puzzle than last season. They could start, from left to right, Garry Gilliam, Mark Glowinski, Justin Britt, rookie Germain Ifedi (Texas A&M) and J'Marcus Webb. The four veterans were all rated "poor" by Pro Football Focus in 2015; this is not exactly the "Run to Daylight" Packers of the 1960s.

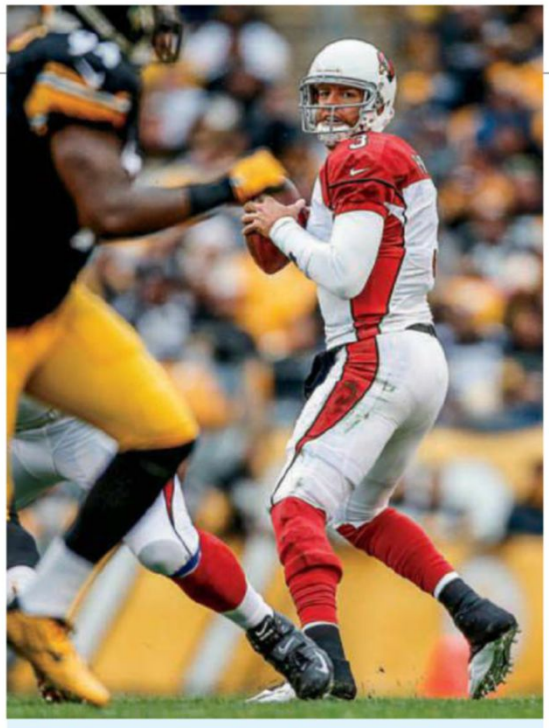
You could say the same about the *2016* Packers, who appear dependent on the ability of receiver Jordy Nelson to rebound from right-ACL surgery (he was cleared to return to practice only last week) and of Dom Capers's defense to stop the run when it counts.

That leaves the Cardinals, who I see as having three crucial weaknesses: the strategic shortcomings of coach Bruce Arians, who nearly choked away a division-round game against Green Bay last January; the poise of Palmer, who was stellar in the regular season and then embarrassed himself in the title game against Carolina; and the presence of center A.Q. Shipley, who's no better than a replacement-level player. (Just ask the 2013 Ravens about how a poor center can torpedo a season.)

As much as it worries me to risk anything on Palmer and his 66.9 postseason passer rating (Arizona beat Green Bay *in spite of him*), the Cardinals have arguably the most complete team in the NFL, with a ton of experience on both sides of the ball. They can throw all over the field—and they could even before second-year running back David Johnson came on as a receiving threat in the latter half of last season. On defense safety Tyrann Mathieu is back to wreak havoc after a right-ACL tear, and Pro Bowl end Chandler Jones (late of New England) should bring some much-needed pass rush.

I'm willing to bet that Palmer (who hadn't played a postseason game in six years before last January) and Arians (who in the playoffs saw the downside of his rigid "no risk-it, no biscuit" approach) learned a lot from last year's bitter ending and can apply those lessons moving forward. If this team is healthy and has grown from its mistakes, the Cardinals are fully capable of winning it all, even if it means entering January as a wild-card team and visiting Dallas, Seattle and Green Bay.

In an Arizona-Pittsburgh rematch of Super Bowl XLIII, the Cardinals' dangerous running game and stifling secondary will slow down the Steelers enough to grab a dramatic victory. How about a Larry Fitzgerald toe-touch TD in the back-right corner of the NRG Stadium end zone to match Santonio Holmes's heroics eight years earlier, in Tampa? Sounds good to me. —G.A.B.



The Postseason

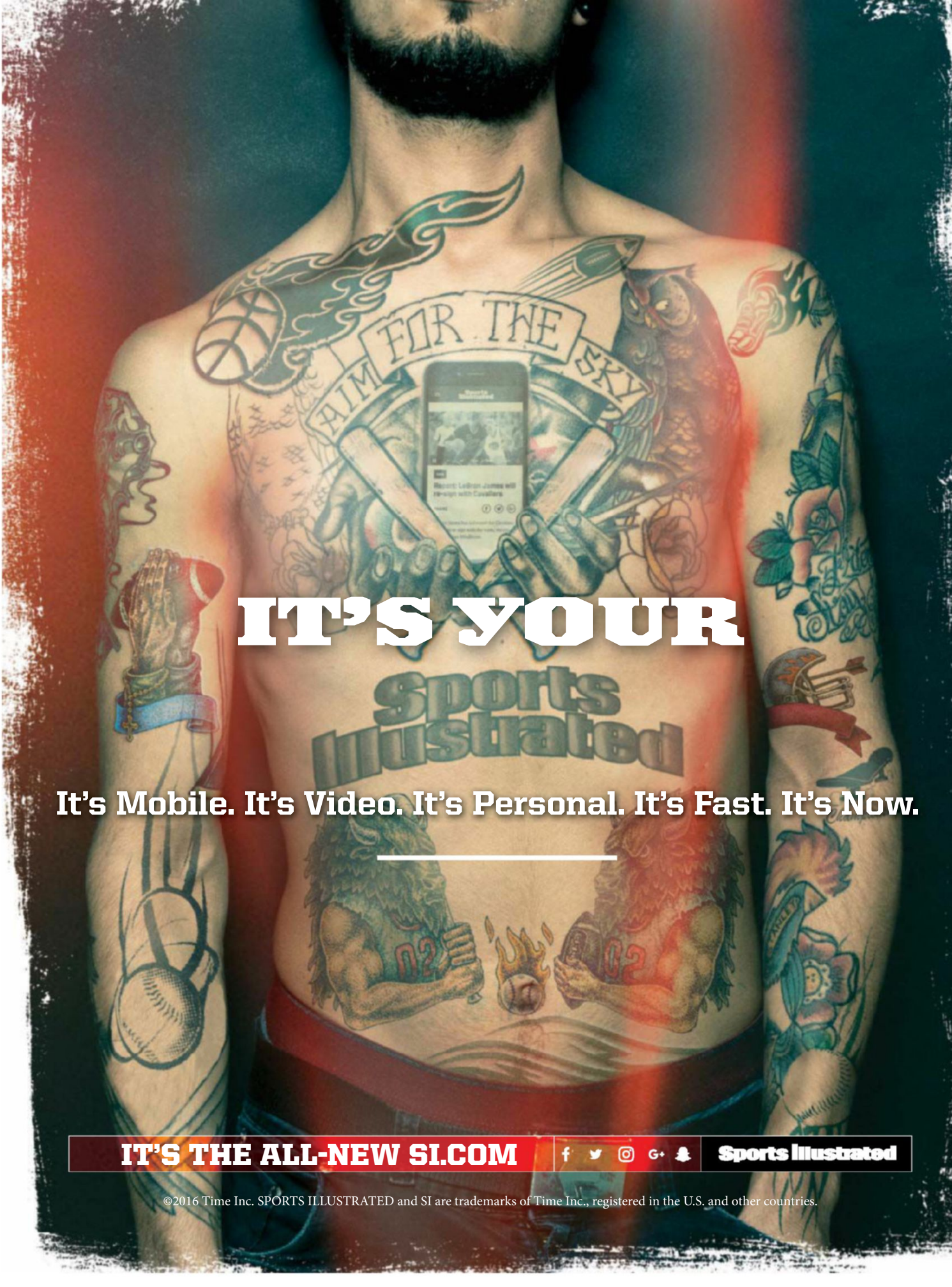
AFC	NFC
WILD CARD	**WILD CARD**
Colts 24 Bengals 21	Cardinals 23 Cowboys 10
Chiefs 30 Chargers 17	Packers 24 Vikings 20
DIVISIONAL ROUND	**DIVISIONAL ROUND**
Steelers 27 Chiefs 20	Packers 27 Panthers 24
Patriots 35 Colts 17	Cardinals 20 Seahawks 17
CHAMPIONSHIP GAME	**CHAMPIONSHIP GAME**
Steelers 30 Patriots 27	Cardinals 27 Packers 23

SUPER BOWL LI

FEB. 5, 2017

NRG Stadium in Houston

Cardinals 40, Steelers 37



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1 New England Patriots

Pressure to perform, with or without Brady

Since a certain accomplished quarterback is suspended for the first four games, it would greatly help the Patriots if their defense was of the smothering persuasion this season. The good news for New England fans: It probably will be, because the Pats are talented, deep and experienced on that side of the ball.

Considering they missed hosting the AFC championship game in much friendlier confines because of a tiebreaker last season, New England knows how valuable every win can be. Jimmy Garoppolo, the team's second-round pick in 2014, will start the season under center as Tom Brady serves his Deflategate suspension, but even if Garoppolo does a perfect Brady impression, the offense is not a likely source for improvement after already ranking third in scoring last season.

That's where the defense comes in. The group showed signs in 2015, ranking ninth in yards allowed and 10th in points; this was the first time the Patriots finished in the top 10 in both categories since '08.

This season the defensive starters return at every position except right end, where Chandler Jones was traded to the Cardinals entering a contract year. But Jabaal Sheard, who takes over for Jones, played 558 snaps last season and led the team in run stuffs (11) and was second in pressures (16). While left end Rob Ninkovich tore his triceps in training camp, if

LB Jamie Collins

The MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

Hear out my case for Martellus Bennett *(left)*. He is one of the 10 best all-around tight ends in football, but this year he'll be, unequivocally, the second-best one on his team. That doesn't mean he can't be almost as valuable as Rob Gronkowski. Bennett, 29, gives New England two tight ends who can run routes from anywhere as well as block in the run game. What makes the Patriots hard to defend is the way they use their tight ends to create mismatches for other players. New England is particularly clever in deploying them outside, which can result in a slot receiver being covered by a linebacker. With tight ends who can win their routes, such formations border on unstoppable. Even better: The Pats can run the ball with these same tight ends, allowing them to go from spread formations to condensed ones without substituting. With the addition of the 6' 6", 275-pound Bennett defenses will struggle to match up. *—Andy Benoit*

CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP (COLLINS); JIM MAHONEY/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **12–4**
2015 Record: **12–4**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 22	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30		NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
at **ARI**	*vs.* **MIA**	*vs.* **HOU** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **BUF**	*at* **CLE**	*vs.* **CIN**	*at* **PIT**	*at* **BUF**	BYE	*vs.* **SEA**	*at* **SF**	*at* **NYJ**

= PREDICTED WINNER

he can't return for Week 1, New England has former Rams first-round pick **Chris Long** ready to go.

The defense is not only deep but also—as coach **Bill Belichick** prefers it—versatile. In **Devin McCourty**, **Patrick Chung** and **Duron Harmon**, the Patriots have three safeties who can be deployed differently, based on an opponent's strengths. Chung has revived a foundering career to become one of the game's best box safeties and routinely makes life difficult for opposing tight ends with his physical play. Last year cornerbacks **Malcolm Butler** and **Logan Ryan** became one of the league's better duos, and they can play in man coverage or zone. Second-round pick **Cyrus Jones** should be an upgrade at nickel corner over last year's uninspiring rotation after becoming well-versed in a similar scheme at Alabama.

With Chung acting as a de facto linebacker, the Patriots usually only play with two, **Dont'a Hightower** and **Jamie Collins**. That would be a problem for most teams, especially against the run, but both are so good that the undermanned position is a strength. Collins, a rare athlete, is the playmaker: He causes problems when he drops into passing lanes, and he blitzes from anywhere.

On the line **Malcom Brown** steadily improved during his rookie season and should be a more constant disrupter this season. **Alan Branch**, a versatile veteran, and **Terrance Knighton**, a standout with the Broncos before a subpar season in Washington, are run stuffers who are also effective at rushing the passer. On the end Ninkovich, Sheard, Long and second-year player **Trey Flowers** embody New England's defense: tough and physical at the point of attack.

This could be the last go-round for this unit. Collins, Hightower, Butler (restricted), Sheard, Ninkovich, Ryan, Long, Branch, Knighton and Harmon are in the final year of their contracts. The Patriots have cap room for 2017, but it will be hard to retain all of those players. In many ways, it could be now or never for the defense. *—Greg A. Bedard*

DEC. 4	DEC. 12	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **LA**	*vs.* **BAL** ON MONDAY	*at* **DEN**	*vs.* **NYJ**	*at* **MIA**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8–8**
2015 Record: **8–8**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 15	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
at **BAL**	*vs.* **NYJ** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **ARI**	*at* **NE**	*at* **LA**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 Buffalo Bills

In pursuit of a defensive rebound

Rex Ryan's first season as Bills coach was a journey into bizarro-land. After being carried by his defense during his six years with the Jets, the exact opposite happened in Buffalo. Former 49ers coordinator Greg Roman oversaw an effective offense that finished 12th in the NFL with 379 points, thanks to a rushing attack that led the league in yards (2,432) and touchdowns (19). But the other side of the ball, Ryan's domain, was a borderline disaster. The Bills sank from fourth in the league in yards allowed in 2014 under coordinator Jim Schwartz, to 19th. They also went from 54 sacks to just 21, the fewest for Buffalo since the stat became official in 1982.

For Ryan, who coordinated some great Ravens defenses from 2005 to '08 and created the scheme that led New York to back-to-back AFC championship game appearances, Buffalo's performance was embarrassing. "Yeah, we were terrible," says Ryan, sarcastically adding, "And I can't coach defense anymore for some reason."

The Bills had little cap space with which to sign free agents, so they have to rely on draft picks and internal improvement to rebound defensively. To help the latter, Ryan brought in his twin brother, **Rob Ryan**, the former Saints defensive coordinator, and also retired All-Pro safety **Ed Reed**, who played for Rex Ryan with the Ravens and the Jets and is now Buffalo's assistant defensive backs coach.

Those voices are needed because last year players struggled to master Ryan's scheme, in which each unit, from the line to the linebackers to the DBs, has its own strategy on a given play. When choreographed well, the defense calls to mind the Bolshoi Ballet. When it's not, it resembles a mosh pit. The Bills underestimated the learning curve involved in switching from Schwartz's simplified 4–3 to Ryan's swarming 3–4. It didn't help that they were unable

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 7		NOV. 20	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **SF**	*at* **MIA**	*vs.* **NE**	*at* **SEA** ON MONDAY	BYE	*at* **CIN**	*vs.* **JAX**	*at* **OAK**	*vs.* **PIT**	*vs.* **CLE**	*vs.* **MIA** ON SATURDAY	*at* **NYJ**

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

It was news when cornerback **Stephon Gilmore** showed up to training camp. In the final year of his contract, he was expected to hold out for a long-term deal. Gilmore's history of shoulder and wrist injuries makes it tough for GMs to assess his value, but when he's on the field, there's no doubt about his worth. With long arms, sturdy mechanics and short-area read-and-react ability, he's a top-level corner. When Rex Ryan took over in Buffalo last year, he thought Gilmore would play the Darrelle Revis role in his blitz-happy defense. But with 2015 second-round pick Ronald Darby showing elite cover skills, the 6' 1", 190-pound Gilmore didn't need to shadow the top receiver. Instead he usually played the right side, Darby the left. For most teams, having two bona fide cover corners is a luxury. But in a scheme like Ryan's, which relies on matchup coverages downfield, it is imperative. Without Gilmore, the Bills could not play their aggressive style of defense. —A.B.

to sign former Ryan players who knew the system.

Buffalo will get no instant boost from its rookie class. First-round pick **Shaq Lawson** of Clemson, a pass-rushing outside linebacker, may not be back until midseason after right shoulder surgery in May. **Reggie Ragland**, selected in the second round from Alabama, will most likely sit out the year after tearing his left ACL in training camp.

To replace Ragland and to pair with **Zach Brown**, an underrated linebacker brought over from the Titans, the Bills signed two free agents off the street: former Patriots and Bills 'backer **Brandon Spikes**, and **David Hawthorne**, who played for Rob Ryan in New Orleans. After releasing Mario Williams this off-season, Buffalo is still searching for bodies at outside linebacker while Shaq Lawson and **Manny Lawson** (non-football injury list/pectoral) try to make it back.

The positive news: The defensive line will improve simply because **Kyle Williams**, who missed five games with a right knee injury, is back. Powerful third-round pick **Adolphus Washington** (Ohio State) will start at defensive end, while nosetackle **Marcell Dareus** remains one of the best in the NFL (though he will miss four games for violating the league's substance abuse policy). The secondary, which could be one of the best in the league, is led by its corners: As a rookie last year **Ronald Darby** showed that he is a legitimate complement to standout **Stephon Gilmore**.

Despite these strengths, the success of the defense will depend largely on how Rex Ryan patches the holes at linebacker. One thing he hasn't lost is his trademark bravado. "I've said all along our defense will be much improved," he says. "And I'll stand by that." —*Greg A. Bedard*

↑ **DT** Kyle Williams

MARK ZALESKI/AP

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3 New York Jets

Riding the line as far as it will take them

Sheldon Richardson was coming back from vacation in the Bahamas on July 15 when his dad texted him the news, and at first the Jets' Pro Bowl defensive lineman thought it was a joke. Linemate Muhammad Wilkerson, who was widely expected to play under the franchise tag this season, had signed a five-year, $86 million extension. Then Richardson saw Wilkerson's Instagram post and immediately called to congratulate him. The contract means that the NFL's best defensive line trio—Richardson (signed through 2017), Leonard Williams (2018) and Wilkerson (2020)—will be together for at least two more years. New York is betting $76 million in guaranteed money that pressure up the middle is the way to bring down the NFL, and especially division rival New England.

We will not give the D-line trio typical position designations, because they are not typical defensive linemen. They are all 290-plus-pound ends who also play tackle—and look as if they could play linebacker. Richardson actually did line up for 182 snaps at outside 'backer in 2015, as coach Todd Bowles (who runs a base 3–4 defense) searched for ways to get his best players on the field. Last year Wilkerson had 30 or more quarterback pressures at both tackle and end, while Williams led the team with 32 quarterback hits as a rookie. "We're a group that can create a lot of mismatches, because you never know

DE
Muhammad Wilkerson

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

All-Pro cornerback Darrelle Revis *(left)* hit some rough spots in 2015, with struggles against Raiders rookie Amari Cooper in Week 8, the Bills' Sammy Watkins two weeks later and the Texans' DeAndre Hopkins the following game. But Revis won plenty of battles too, taking on top receivers ranging from true slot Julian Edelman in New England to Jaguars perimeter weapon Allen Robinson. At 31, Revis might be a half-step slower, but his game has always been predicated on smarts and technique anyway. Which is why coach Todd Bowles builds his blitzes and coverages around Revis's lockdown skills. He won't be relied on this way every down; Bowles, while partial to man coverage, still calls plenty of zone. But on money downs—third-and-long or hurry-up situations—Bowles becomes aggressive with his pressures, and that's where having a true No. 1 corner is crucial. —A.B.

ALEX GOULDETT/GETTY IMAGES (WILKERSON); AARON M. SPRECHER/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8–8**
2015 Record: **10–6**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 15	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 17	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13		NOV. 27
vs. **CIN**	*at* **BUF** ON THURSDAY	*at* **KC**	*vs.* **SEA**	*at* **PIT**	*at* **ARI** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **BAL**	*at* **CLE**	*at* **MIA**	*vs.* **LA**	BYE	*vs. NE*

= PREDICTED WINNER

where we'll be or what we're doing," Wilkerson says.

The Jets did lose nosetackle Damon Harrison, the league's best run-stopper in 2015 according to Pro Football Focus, to the Giants in free agency. But they found a replacement in former Steeler **Steve McLendon**, who actually makes the line more versatile. Unlike Harrison, who lined up exclusively at nosetackle, the 310-pound McLendon (a dilettante in ballet) can play multiple positions.

Williams, the sixth pick of the 2015 draft, believes his pressures last year should have led to more than three sacks, which is why he spent his off-season training with his former USC coaches, working to improve at disengaging from blockers and closing on the quarterback. "It's just a half-second difference between you reaching for the quarterback right as he throws it, and you getting a sack," Williams says.

Wilkerson spent the summer rehabbing the broken right leg that he sustained in the final game of 2015, but he expects to be ready for Week 1. Backed by a more than capable secondary, the Jets' defense, ranked fourth in '15 in yards allowed, should again be among the league's best.

On offense the big question is how quarterback **Ryan Fitzpatrick** will perform after an off-season contract holdout that limited his work with teammates. While he did set a franchise record with 31 passing touchdowns in 2015, his six interceptions in the fourth quarter of seven-point games (tied for the most in the NFL) often proved to be the undoing of an offense that ranked 10th in yards gained. The personnel will be largely the same, except at running back. Chris Ivory left for the Jaguars and will be replaced by former Bear **Matt Forte**, still a productive rusher and a pass-catching threat at age 30.

One challenge not to be underestimated: The Jets will go from playing the easiest schedule in the NFL in 2015 to the seventh toughest in '16. Which means that Wilkerson, Richardson and Williams will need to dominate more than ever if the team is to make its first postseason berth since 2010. *—Ben Baskin*

DEC. 5	DEC. 11	DEC. 17	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **IND** ON MONDAY	*at* **SF**	*vs.* **MIA** ON SATURDAY	*at* **NE** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **BUF**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **7–9**
2015 Record: **6–10**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	SEPT. 29	OCT. 9
at **SEA**	*at* **NE**	*vs.* **CLE**	*at* **CIN** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **TEN**

= PREDICTED WINNER

4 Miami Dolphins

It's a make-or-break year for QB1

Entering his fifth season as a starter for the Dolphins, **Ryan Tannehill** remains an enigma. He seemingly has everything you want in a franchise quarterback: size (6' 4", 216 pounds), elite athleticism, a right arm that can make any throw and enough smarts to get the job done.

But under Tannehill, Miami has gone 29–35 and twice blown shots at playoff berths. His completion percentage (61.9) and passer rating (85.2) are both mediocre. The Dolphins point to Tannehill's 15,460 passing yards, which rank third all-time to Peyton Manning's (16,418) and Dan Marino's (16,177) for quarterbacks after four seasons. But given how pass-reliant the NFL has become and how few QBs entering the league are prepared to start, that stat is almost meaningless.

In Tannehill's defense, he is on his third coach and fourth coordinator, and most quarterbacks are only as good as their supporting cast. Has the coaching and talent been good enough to take a true measure of his ability? The Dolphins don't think so, but that should change this year, because they've done everything they can to give Tannehill a chance to flourish.

That starts with the hiring of first-year coach **Adam Gase**, who developed the reputation as a quarterback whisperer at his previous stops as the offensive coordinator of the Bears (Jay Cutler) and the QB coach and later coordinator of the Broncos (Tim Tebow and Manning). Tannehill is at his best on the move and when plays break down, but he has struggled in the important presnap phase of the game. That requires not only getting the team into good plays and out of bad ones, but also anticipating what the defense will do and where he needs to deliver the ball. Gase has great expertise here, and he will provide Tannehill with hands-on instruction. "I feel great where he's at right now," Gase says. "It's not as easy as the guy that I've had before [Manning] made it look. It's a lot of

OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 17	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **PIT**	*vs.* **BUF**	BYE	*vs.* **NYJ**	*at* **SD**	*at* **LA**	*vs.* **SF**	*at* **BAL**	*vs.* **ARI**	*at* **NYJ** ON SATURDAY	*at* **BUF** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **NE**

work. It takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of experience and we're going to have growing pains."

The Dolphins have beefed up the offensive line, one whose deficiencies contributed to Tannehill's being sacked 184 times in his first four seasons, the most of any quarterback over that period. Miami drafted Ole Miss tackle Laremy Tunsil in the first round, but then retained former Pro Bowl left tackle Branden Albert and moved Tunsil to left guard. Standout center Mike Pouncey anchors the protection, and former Saints Pro Bowl tackle Jermon Bushrod will battle it out at right guard with veterans Billy Turner and Kraig Urbik. Ja'Wuan James, a 2014 first-round pick, is solid at right tackle. Says Pouncey, in his sixth season in Miami, "This will be one of the first years in a long time we'll have depth going into the season."

Miami's ground game will rely on the oft-injured former All-Pro Arian Foster (free agent, Texans) and the inexperienced Jay Ajayi (49 carries last year as a fifth-round rookie). But Tannehill has plenty of capable receivers. Jarvis Landry, Kenny Stills, DeVante Parker, Griff Whalen (free agent, Colts) and third-round pick Leonte Caroo (Rutgers) can threaten defenses long and short. Tight end Jordan Cameron is athletic and an effective red zone target.

The Dolphins signed Tannehill to a four-year, $95 million extension in May 2015, but they can walk away from the deal before next season (when his cap number balloons to $20.3 million) without much damage. One way or another, this will be the year Tannehill shows whether he's worthy of his starting job. —*Greg A. Bedard*

↑ **QB** Ryan Tannehill

MATT DUNHAM/AP

TMMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh's first year as a Dolphin was tumultuous—there were reports that the former Lion was deviating from the scheme, Miami played poorly, and the coaching staff, including defensive coordinator Kevin Coyle, was fired last October. Now Suh has a chance at a fresh start with new DC Vance Joseph, who has promised a more attack-oriented approach—which means more blitzing on third down. But to do that the Dolphins need to get stops on first and second down, and that's where the 6' 4", 305-pound Suh comes in. In Joseph's 4-3, Suh will most likely often align on the same side as the tight end. Three blockers (the tight end, tackle and guard) will take on Suh and the defensive end, with Suh being the one who gets doubled. He's seen plenty of this in his career, and his best attribute is the power he uses to wear down opponents late in the play. Miami's system will be depending on it. —A.B.

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1 Pittsburgh Steelers

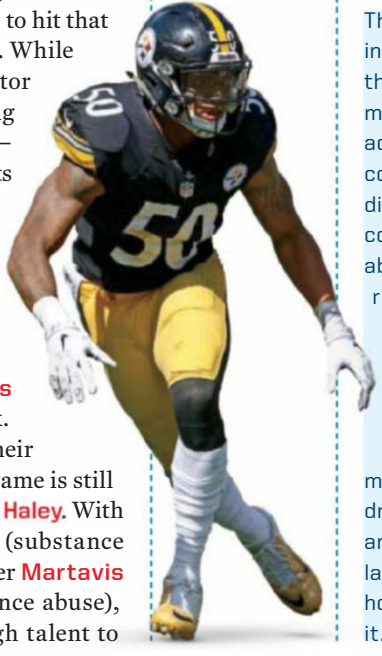
Mr. Haley's 30-point plan to glory

Pittsburgh went into last season with the goal of averaging 30 points. But after injuries to quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, running back Le'Veon Bell, center Maurkice Pouncey and left tackle Kelvin Beachum, it came up short (26.4) in a season that ended with a 23–16 loss at Denver in the divisional round.

For the Steelers to follow through on their Super Bowl potential, they'll likely need to hit that points goal this season, if not exceed it. While the defense made strides in coordinator Keith Butler's first season after taking over for Hall of Famer Dick LeBeau—Pittsburgh went from allowing 23.0 points per game to 19.9—it is still far from the swarming, dominating units that led the team to Super Bowl appearances in 2005, '07 and '10. The pass rush is not consistent enough to compensate for a secondary that lacks playmakers and is counting on first-round pick Artie Burns of Miami to flash quickly at cornerback.

So the Steelers will ride or die with their offense once again. "Thirty points per game is still a goal," says offensive coordinator Todd Haley. With Bell facing a three-game suspension (substance abuse policy violation) and No. 2 receiver Martavis Bryant banished for the year (substance abuse), the road is harder. Still, there's enough talent to

WR
Antonio Brown



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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

The Steelers run an intricate zone scheme that demands their midfield defenders adjust their help coverages on the fly, disguise and execute complex blitzes, and, above all else, read and react in the run game. It takes veteran awareness and first-round talent to do this, which is why Pittsburgh's model has been to draft linebackers early and defensive backs later—the opposite of how most teams do it. These linebackers need time to excel in the system, and the latest to blossom is 2014 first-round pick Ryan Shazier *(left)* out of Ohio State. Last year injuries limited the 6' 1", 230-pound Shazier to only 12 games, but down the stretch he was the Steelers' most dynamic defender. His straight-line speed is the best on the team. (Yes, the team; over the summer he beat wideouts Antonio Brown, Markus Wheaton and Sammie Coates in a race). Shazier could be an All-Pro in 2016.—A.B.

JARED WICKERHAM/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); GREG TROTT/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **11–5**
2015 Record: **10–6**

SEPT. 12	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 24
at **WAS** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **CIN**	*at* **PHI**	*vs.* **KC**	*vs.* **NYJ**	*at* **MIA**	*vs.* **NE**	BYE	*at* **BAL**	*vs.* **DAL**	*at* **CLE**	*at* **IND** ON THURSDAY

= PREDICTED WINNER

overcome those absences. The 34-year-old Roethlisberger has developed a rhythm with Haley and is playing the best football of his career: Over the past two seasons he has completed 67.5% of his passes and thrown for 318.9 yards per game. Antonio Brown has been the gold standard at receiver with a league-leading 265 catches over that span. With Bryant out, Pittsburgh will need more from Markus Wheaton (44 catches last season) and 2015 third-round pick Sammie Coates, who had an excellent camp. Pouncey is back. DeAngelo Williams (1,274 all-purpose yards and 11 combined touchdowns last year) has shown that he can capably replace Bell.

Left tackle and tight end, however, could determine the Steelers' fate. They decided not to re-sign Beachum, who had developed into a solid back-side protector for Roethlisberger. But the team obviously has confidence in 6' 9", 320-pound Alejandro Villanueva. The second-year tackle, who entered Army as a receiver and tight end, is a surprisingly spry athlete, and he had 10 solid starts on the left side after Beachum went down last year.

Tight end is a trickier proposition. Heath Miller, who caught 60 passes in his 11th season in Pittsburgh, retired, as did valued veteran Matt Spaeth. The normally free-agency-averse Steelers gambled on Ladarius Green, signing him to a four-year, $20 million contract. But they haven't even been able to activate him off the PUP list, because of an ankle issue or because of recurring headaches that may date back to his time playing with the Chargers. For now their best option is second-year man Jesse James. He had only eight receptions last year but showed potential, catching a key touchdown in a victory over the Raiders and hauling in a 22-yard pass in the playoff loss to the Broncos. Roethlisberger and Haley both love to use the tight end, especially in the red zone, so the Steelers must get something out of the position if they want to hit that magical and much-needed 30-point plateau.

—Greg A. Bedard

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 25	JAN. 1
vs. **NYG**	*at* **BUF**	*at* **CIN**	*vs.* **BAL**	*vs.* **CLE**

Schedule SI's 2016 Prediction: **10-6**
2015 Record: **12-4**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	SEPT. 29	OCT. 9
at **NYJ**	*at* **PIT**	*vs.* **DEN**	*vs.* **MIA** ON THURSDAY	*at* **DAL**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 Cincinnati Bengals

Trying to win the mental game

The way coach Marvin Lewis sees it, the Bengals' brass had two ways to respond to last season's chaotic playoff loss, the team's fifth straight wild-card exit. Just one involved Lewis's staying in Cincinnati. "The only way to flip the script in this league is you get new players and new coaches," he says. "That didn't happen, and it's not going to happen." Without an overhaul mandated from above, Lewis says, "You've got to feel good about your success and keep building upon your success."

That success ran out last January, only 1:23 from the Bengals' first playoff victory since 1990, when running back Jeremy Hill fumbled in the red zone. Then Ben Roethlisberger, bum shoulder and all, marched the Steelers down the field with short passes before linebacker Vontaze Burfict hit Antonio Brown high on an incompletion, earning a 15-yard penalty (and a three-game suspension to start this season). In the ensuing hubbub cornerback Adam Jones gave Pittsburgh another 15 yards with an unsportsmanlike conduct call, setting up the Chris Boswell 35-yard field goal for a 18–16 win that moved Lewis to 0–7 in the playoffs.

"Everyone keeps bringing it up," Lewis said in April. "We have to move on," For some it hasn't been easy. Hill said in May that his mistake is "still the elephant in the room any time I walk in somewhere." Jones said he has watched the game 10 times, "and it hurt me to my heart that we let it go like that." "We still think about it," linebacker Vincent Rey says, "How close but how far."

Make no mistake, Lewis has not forgotten either. This off-season, when guest speakers came to meetings, Rey noticed a theme. While matters such as fatherhood and social media were also discussed, "We would talk about being smart, about attitude, controlling your attitude," he says. "Just how to win."

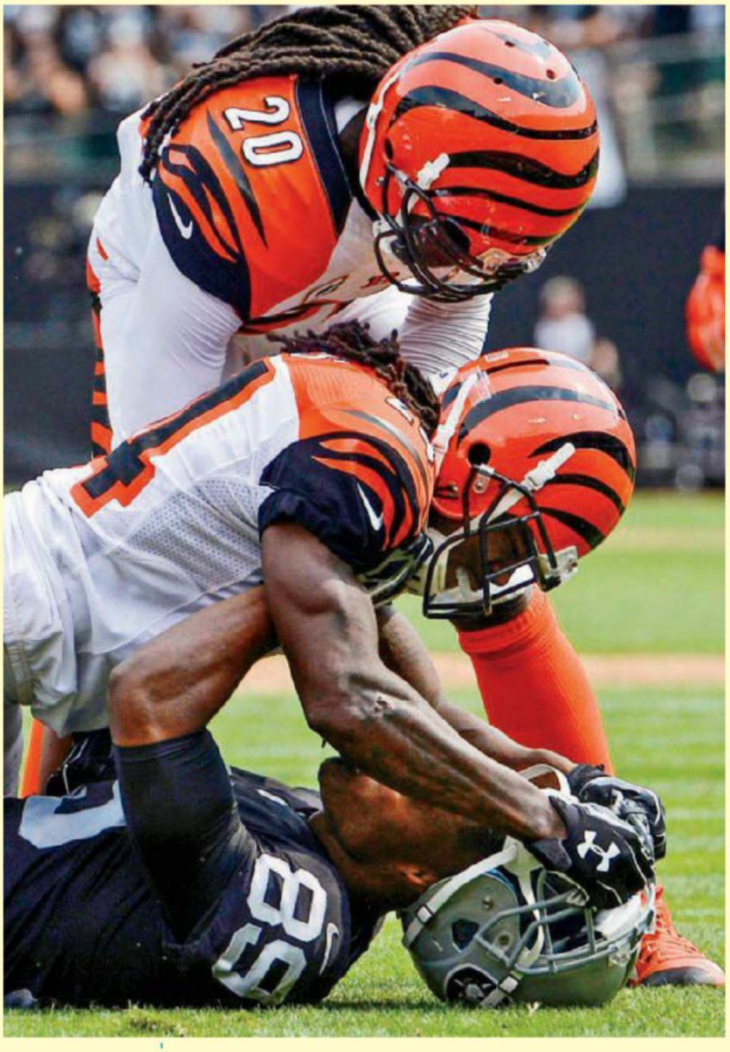
OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30		NOV. 14	NOV. 20	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **NE**	*vs.* **CLE**	*vs.* **WAS**	BYE	*at* **NYG** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **BUF**	*at* **BAL**	*vs.* **PHI**	*at* **CLE**	*vs.* **PIT**	*at* **HOU** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **BAL**

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

Cincinnati's offense really clicked last season. The scheme was the same, but everyone was more experienced playing together, and 2013 first-round pick Tyler Eifert blossomed. After missing most of the '14 season with a broken right elbow, the tight end emerged as a red zone weapon. He doesn't have Julius Thomas's length or Rob Gronkowski's brawn, but the deceptively athletic Eifert hurt defenses running down the seams and on routes beginning from a wide-split position, where he was winning battles against some cornerbacks. He assumes an even more significant role in 2016, as quarterback Andy Dalton adjusts to new wide receivers Brandon LaFell and Tyler Boyd, a second-round pick from Pitt. Eifert is recovering from May surgery on his left ankle, and his return by September is in question. If he's out, the Bengals' schematic continuity and red zone flexibility will suffer. —A.B.



↑ **CB** Adam Jones

JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP/TNS/ABACA

Psychologist Peter Ganshirt came to speak multiple times. The team also watched Admiral William McRaven's 2014 University of Texas commencement address—the one in which he said, "Every SEAL knows that under the keel, at the darkest moment of the mission, is the time when you must be calm, composed."

Entering his 14th season in Cincinnati, Lewis is not leading a revolution from within. Eighteen starters return this year, with the most notable losses being tackle Andre Smith and receivers Marvin Jones and Mohamed Sanu. But the Bengals have young, highly drafted replacements at the ready. The motto Lewis chose for this year, "Pound the rock," is similar to the one he used in his first season, "Keep shoveling." The man he picked to replace departed offensive coordinator Hue Jackson, Ken Zampese, was the quarterbacks coach last year. On the defensive side Lewis brought in two former assistants to coach the defensive line and secondary. And for the linebackers, he hired Jim Haslett.

Haslett is a fan of Burfict's and remembers his playoff hit with a mix of admiration and ire. "He has to cover the guy to the flat, but he's reading the quarterback's eyes and has a chance to get an interception—but at the last second he knew he couldn't get there, so he stuck the flipper up," Haslett says. "Can you change somebody like that? That's kind of instincts. But maybe I can help him next time around so that he won't do that. But he has great instincts."

That hit is Lewis's Bengals: impressive and unsatisfying at the same time. That's what all the meetings are about. —*Jacob Feldman*

3 Baltimore Ravens

Minding the offense, finding the run game

For the first time in four years, the Ravens will not have a new offensive coordinator. Marc Trestman, the cerebral, bespectacled lawyer who succeeded Gary Kubiak after the 2014 season, is back with the club. In Baltimore, that counts as continuity.

True, Trestman bombed in his two-year stint as coach of the Bears, going 13–19, but he has a considerable acumen for offensive football. Last year Baltimore fans couldn't wait to see how Trestman, who'd worked with Bernie Kosar, Steve Young and Jake Plummer in their primes, might push Joe Flacco; how he'd weld his supercharged version of the West Coast offense with the team's zone running schemes, the hard-nosed signature of coach John Harbaugh.

The truth is, the fans are still waiting. As the Ravens finished with the worst record of the eight-year Harbaugh era (5–11), no fewer than 14 offensive players, including six Week 1 starters, ended the season on IR. Among them: Flacco (left ACL), 2014 Pro Bowl running back Justin Forsett (compound fracture of right arm) and stalwart wideout Steve Smith (torn right Achilles). Trestman wasn't game-planning so much as he was performing triage. Baltimore started four quarterbacks, the last being Texans cast-off Ryan Mallett. It

QB
Joe Flacco

The MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Meet Brandon Williams *(left)*, the best football player you've probably never heard of. He's 6' 1", weighs 340 pounds and was drafted out of Missouri Southern (Division II) in the third round in 2013. He's become a dominating force, but in a generally thankless role. That isn't to say he can't, and doesn't, flash. Many think of the Ravens' defense as a 3-4, which would make Williams a nosetackle, but in terms of gap responsibilities, it's really more of a 4-3, and Williams is actually a nose shade, lining up over the center's shoulder. His job is to plug the A-gap and take on the double teams that offenses like to dish inside. He still has the freedom to penetrate, though, and he often does. Maybe Williams will be more noticed after this year when he becomes a free agent; the bidding will make plain how formidable and valued he really is. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8-8**
2015 Record: **5-11**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 10	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
vs. **BUF**	*at* **CLE**	*at* **JAX**	*vs.* **OAK**	*vs.* **WAS**	*at* **NYG**	*at* **NYJ**	BYE	*vs.* **PIT**	*vs.* **CLE** ON THURSDAY	*at* **DAL**	*vs.* **CIN**

= PREDICTED WINNER

ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES (FLACCO); SCOTT BOEHM/AP

was a testament to Trestman's improv skills that the Ravens wound up 14th in total offense (359.3 ypg).

Last season was a one-off, according to All-Pro right guard Marshal Yanda, who says that, in year two under Trestman, "we're completing more balls, things are clicking quicker, we're just more *crisp*."

The key, of course, is Flacco, who has made, by all accounts, a complete recovery. So the spotlight shifts to the man charged with protecting his blind side, 6' 6", 320-pound Ronnie Stanley, the No. 6 pick out of Notre Dame. How's the kid doing? "The best compliment I can give him," says Forsett, "is that I don't notice him. We haven't missed a beat when he's out there."

It's a tough gig, but Stanley won't have to do it alone. "We have certain protections where we can help," says Yanda, "and Marc does a good job changing up the protections, mixing things up. We lost a lot of games last year, but we didn't give up a lot of sacks."

Yes, they lost 11 games last season—but those 11 losses were decided by a total of 91 points. "We were in a ton of one-score games throughout the season, and we didn't execute," Forsett says. "We were in the red zone a lot, and we couldn't finish."

Forsett's arm is healed, and Harbaugh says he's playing like the feature back who gained 5.4 yards per carry in '14. He is the humble alpha of a young, talented unit that is suddenly, surprisingly deep with Terrance West, Javorius Allen and Kenneth Dixon. They'll make it easier for Trestman to stick to the vow he made upon taking this job. Yes, he had a reputation for airing the ball out. In Baltimore his attack would be built upon "the physicality of our run game."

As it turns out, he's also partial to taking periodic shots downfield. Defense-stretching speedster Mike Wallace, signed as a free agent from the Vikings, gives Flacco a legit deep threat. As evidenced during a scrimmage, when a miked-up Wallace informed a practice official, "Hey, if we're not open, that means they're holding us," he also brings a fair amount of ego.

With Wallace a part of this healed, renewed and improved offense, Baltimore will get some of its swagger back.

—Austin Murphy

DEC. 4	DEC. 12	DEC. 18	DEC. 25	JAN. 1
vs. **MIA**	*at* **NE** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **PHI**	*at* **PIT**	*at* **CIN**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **1-15**
2015 Record: **3-13**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
at **PHI**	*vs.* **BAL**	*at* **MIA**	*at* **WAS**	*vs.* **NE**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

4 Cleveland Browns

A big rookie class brings high hopes

At Baylor wide receiver Corey Coleman used to seek out Oklahoma State's Emmanuel Ogbah after their teams played. The two former Texas high school standouts would shake hands briefly and chat. "It's crazy we are on the same NFL team now," Ogbah says. "He would always tell me, 'See you on top.' "

The first two picks of coach Hue Jackson's regime in Cleveland still have a way to go to reach that level, but they've taken on the responsibility of making the Browns into contenders—a status the team has not enjoyed since the 1980s. (Cleveland last won its division in '89.) "We were all drafted for a reason," Ogbah says, "and that is to come in and help change this program." Coleman compares the current situation to what he experienced when he arrived at Waco in 2012; the Bears hadn't won a conference title since 1994 but finished first in the Big 12 twice during his four years there.

The Bengals' offensive coordinator last season, Jackson, 50, moved modestly in free agency, most notably signing starting quarterback Robert Griffin III to a two-year, $15 million deal. But the draft is the foundation of this overhaul project. "I truly believe that this class will start to put a stamp on what we are truly about and what we are becoming," Jackson said in April. Using five trades—including dealing the No. 2 pick for No. 8 and then that for No. 15—the Browns turned their 10 choices into 14 rookies, three future high picks and veteran corner Jamar Taylor. Their 14-draftee haul tied for the biggest since the NFL went to seven rounds in 1994.

Beyond its size, the class is notable for two characteristics. One is the collection of hardware Cleveland acquired along with its draft picks. The new Browns collectively earned three national awards, five Conference Player of the Year honors and six All-America nods. Talk of the picks' college awards became such

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 10	NOV. 20	NOV. 27		DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **TEN**	*at* **CIN**	*vs.* **NYJ**	*vs.* **DAL**	*at* **BAL** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **PIT**	*vs.* **NYG**	BYE	*vs.* **CIN**	*at* **BUF**	*vs.* **SD** ON SATURDAY	*at* **PIT**

SCOTT BOEHM/AP

a theme on TV commentary that chief strategy officer **Paul DePodesta**, a baseball analytics guru who was hired in January, at one point turned to Jackson in the war room and joked, "What? Did they want us to take guys who weren't productive in college?"

The second is that many of the draftees come with an underdog story. Third-round defensive end **Carl Nassib** (Penn State) and fourth-round outside linebacker **Joe Schobert** (Wisconsin) were walk-ons. Quarterback **Cody Kessler**, another third-round selection (USC), and inside linebacker **Scooby Wright III** (Arizona), the team's seventh-round pick, battled the "undersized" label. Most impressive is their third-rounder, offensive tackle **Shon Coleman** (Auburn), who overcame leukemia. DePodesta says, "As much as we are focused on talent, we are focused on character."

↑ **LB** Emmanuel Ogbah

While it takes years to evaluate any draft, veteran left tackle **Joe Thomas** favors the new Browns approach: "It seems like they placed less emphasis on raw ability and more emphasis on toughness, intelligence, how much they like football."

Six months ago Thomas sounded hesitant about staying in Cleveland for another rebuild, but he bought in after meeting with Jackson and executive VP of operations Sashi Brown, and he's been impressed by what he's seen from his young teammates. Shon Coleman has worked late with Thomas. During their first off day of training camp Corey Coleman, Ogbah and other rookies were around the facility putting extra time in. "Not every one of those guys is going to pan out," Thomas says, "but they make your team better."

Putting in the work is a beginning. To truly reach the top, larger challenges await. —J.F.

MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

Whenever a left tackle is drafted early in the first round, people love to say, "Here's their 10-year starter." But left tackles can go bust like players at any other position. Even if they don't, having a rock-solid starter protecting the quarterback's blind side does not solve every problem. Just ask the Browns. **Joe Thomas** is now entering his 10th season. In 2007, after he was taken No. 3 out of Wisconsin, Cleveland went 10–6 and just missed the playoffs. Every year after that they have finished below .500. In all but one of those seasons they were 5–11 or worse. But don't blame Thomas, 31. He's one of the league's steadiest blocking technicians. In pass protection he's tremendous at moving his feet steadily and close to the ground—mowing the lawn, as it's called. This is why he's rarely off balance. And his football IQ is off the charts. The irony is that Thomas's excellence makes him the best trade bait for rebuilding Cleveland. —A.B.

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1 Indianapolis Colts

Putting the line front and center

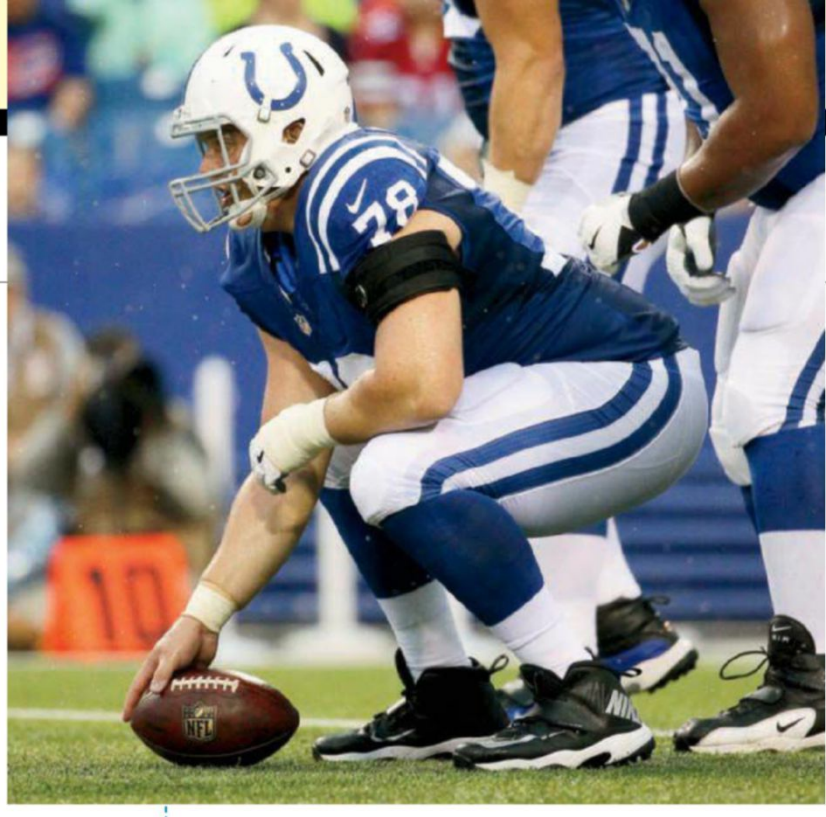
Let's just cut to the chase: The Colts will only go as far as their offensive line will allow quarterback Andrew Luck to take them.

Of course, this has been said in each of the previous four seasons. How'd that go? Luck was the most hit quarterback in the NFL during that time with 375, despite missing nine games last year with a lacerated kidney and abdominal tear. And the running game, which is used to keep defenses honest and alleviate pressure on the quarterback, had the sixth-worst per-carry average during that time (3.89 yards).

In Indianapolis, they believe 2016 will be different because of the changes up front. "I don't think that there's any doubt that we will improve on the offensive line, so I don't even see that as a factor," says offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski.

The Colts are optimistic about their line for a couple of reasons, the chief being the arrival of former Dolphins coach and Packers offensive coordinator Joe Philbin; he takes over for Joe Gilbert, who is now the assistant line coach. Philbin may have had his issues running the show in Miami (he had a 24–28 record in three-plus seasons before being fired last October), but he is widely viewed as one of the finest teachers of offensive line play in the NFL.

Philbin coached the unit through the college ranks and received a master's-level education under Iowa's Kirk Ferentz from 1999 to 2002. Then Philbin worked



C
Ryan Kelly

BILL WIPPERT/AP (KELLY); JOE SKIPPER/AP

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

The idea of a blitz, if it doesn't create a sack, is to force the quarterback to throw the ball early. When that happens, corners need to be up in receivers' faces, or those quick passes will be easy completions. Coach Chuck Pagano, who excelled at manufacturing pressure through blitzes when he was a coordinator in Baltimore, hired former Ravens linebackers coach Ted Monachino during the off-season to serve as his DC in Indy. This should mean more blitzing, but only if cornerback Vontae Davis *(left)* stays healthy. It is hard to call the 5' 11", 207-pound Davis a true shutdown artist because he doesn't travel with receivers when they motion into the slot, and he prefers to stay on the defense's righthand side. But he's very close to that status, and he will be essential to a pressure defense. Few corners are as physical and tight in their coverage as the eighth-year pro. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8-8**
2015 Record: **8-8**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6		NOV. 20	NOV. 24
vs. **DET**	*at* **DEN**	*vs.* **SD**	*at* **JAX** IN LONDON	*vs.* **CHI**	*at* **HOU**	*at* **TEN**	*vs.* **KC**	*at* **GB**	BYE	*vs.* **TEN**	*vs.* **PIT** ON THURSDAY

● = PREDICTED WINNER

with the Green Bay line for four seasons, and even after the Packers promoted him to coordinator in '07, he continued to have a heavy hand with that group.

Says Chudzinski, "He has a great way and rapport with the guys. We started emphasizing fundamentals and techniques with them from the very beginning, and Joe is an outstanding teacher in that way."

It helps that general manager Ryan Grigson finally threw some resources at the unit. One year after not drafting a lineman until the seventh round (Denzelle Good of Division II Mars Hill), Grigson selected four, including first-round center Ryan Kelly. Despite missing some training camp with a left-shoulder injury, the 6' 4", 313-pound Kelly, a unanimous All-America last year at Alabama, has been everything the Colts hoped for. "He's a guy that just fits immediately," Chudzinski says. "It's not too big for him. He's made the adjustment really well."

Indianapolis feels solid and settled with left tackle Anthony Castonzo, left guard Jack Mewhort and Kelly. It appears Joe Reitz, who started 14 games last year, has locked down the right tackle position. Fourth-year player Hugh Thornton, who has missed practice time with a right-foot injury, and Good are battling it out at right guard. Once that position is settled, the Colts can begin the important work, which includes opening bigger running holes for 33-year-old Frank Gore (career-low 3.7 yards per carry last season, his first in Indianapolis) and fifth-year back Robert Turbin, imported from Dallas. Doing that will require coming together as a unit.

"The thing that we all know is that you can't build a great offensive line overnight," says Chudzinski. "The best ones are those that have been together for a long time. They know and understand how each other works, the things they don't even need to say to each other. There's a chemistry that develops. That's ultimately the goal, to have that type of group. And it will take some time."

The Colts don't have much time if they're going to keep Luck healthy and compete with the best teams in the AFC. *—Greg A. Bedard*

DEC. 5	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **NYJ** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **HOU**	*at* **MIN**	*at* **OAK** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **JAX**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8-8**
2015 Record: **9-7**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 22	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
vs. **CHI**	*vs.* **KC**	*at* **NE** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **TEN**	*at* **MIN**

= PREDICTED WINNER

2 Houston Texans

To all that new talent: assimilate ASAP

Training camp in Houston in early August is brutal—the humidity, the unrelenting sun, the screaming of coach Bill O'Brien. It isn't for the faint of heart. Neither is the task of rapidly developing cohesion while learning a complicated scheme, which is what O'Brien's offensive unit must do if the Texans hope to win back-to-back division titles for the second time in franchise history.

O'Brien and coordinator George Godsey acknowledge that this is a daunting challenge, especially because Houston's system requires players to make adjustments after the snap. But they decided that a major overhaul was needed after a 2015 season in which the offense plodded to 339 points (tied for 21st in the NFL), 5,564 total yards (19th) and 4.9 yards per play (tied for 31st).

Change began at quarterback, where, after cycling through four starters last year, the Texans signed Brock Osweiler to a $72 million contract despite his having only seven career starts with the Broncos. At receiver the Texans drafted Will Fuller (first round, Notre Dame) and Braxton Miller (third round, Ohio State). Another rookie, running back Tyler Ervin (fourth round, San Jose State), will be asked to create a threat out of the backfield.

While the Texans have receiver Jaelen Strong, a 2015 third-round pick, and veteran Cecil Shorts making plays in practice, they are hoping that Fuller and Miller develop quickly. In training camp the speedy Fuller was catching the ball consistently (his hands were questioned before the draft), and Miller, the two-time Big Ten offensive player of the year at quarterback, was looking like a natural receiver, despite having switched to the position only in his final year in Columbus.

But Houston's system, which is basically the same as the Patriots', is tough for first-year players. Receiv-

OCT. 16	OCT. 24	OCT. 30		NOV. 13	NOV. 21	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN 1
vs. **IND**	*at* **DEN** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **DET**	BYE	*at* **JAX**	*at* **OAK** MON., MEXICO CITY	*vs.* **SD**	*at* **GB**	*at* **IND**	*vs.* **JAX**	*vs.* **CIN** ON SATURDAY	*at* **TEN**

THE MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

When the Saints visited Houston last November, they did something unusual: They often double-teamed receiver **DeAndre Hopkins** with their free safety. That left the middle of the field open and every other defender in one-on-one coverage. The strategy was not only a testament to Hopkins's productivity—his 1,521 receiving yards in 2015 were third best in the NFL—but also a reflection of the Texans' scarcity of other pass-catching threats.

This is why Houston spent high draft picks this spring on two speedy receivers, Will Fuller and Braxton Miller. Their presence should benefit Hopkins. While he is great at tracking balls and making contested catches, he lacks great speed and is not always a reliable route runner. Receivers who can stretch and spread the field will create more operating room and more margin for error for the fourth-year pro as he learns the game's nuances. —A.B.

ers not only have to know where to line up but how to adjust their routes on the go. There's a reason that New England's rookie receivers rarely make meaningful contributions. Godsey, though, says of his new class, "It's not easy, but so far they're ahead of where we thought they'd be."

The Texans' running scheme, while simpler, will be working in new personnel also. Gone is Arian Foster, who missed 23 games in his final three seasons, and taking his place is free-agent signee **Lamar Miller**, who can run between the tackles but has quickness to beat defenders to the edge. Miller went over 1,000 yards two years ago while averaging 5.1 per carry with the Dolphins. If Houston can complement Miller with a speedy back in passing situations, whether that's Ervin or returning second-year player **Akeem Hunt**, that will spread opposing defenses even more.

To help the ground game, the Texans also fortified their offensive line. Second-round pick **Nick Martin** looks ready enough to replace departed center Ben Jones for Week 1. "He's as impressive an offensive line rookie as I've ever been around," says O'Brien. Former Chiefs right guard **Jeff Allen** is expected to bring consistent toughness, and center/guard **Tony Bergstrom**, signed from the Raiders, will upgrade the depth.

Nearly everyone is back from a defense that after a slow start allowed 10 points or fewer in six of its final nine games and finished third in yards allowed (310.2). "That unit should be even better with the new wrinkles [defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel] has put in," says Godsey. "We know that the offense is going to have to do better, and all these [off-season] changes were made with that in mind. Now we have to get it done." —*Greg A. Bedard*

↑ **QB** Brock Osweiler

BEN MARGOT/AP

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3 Jacksonville Jaguars

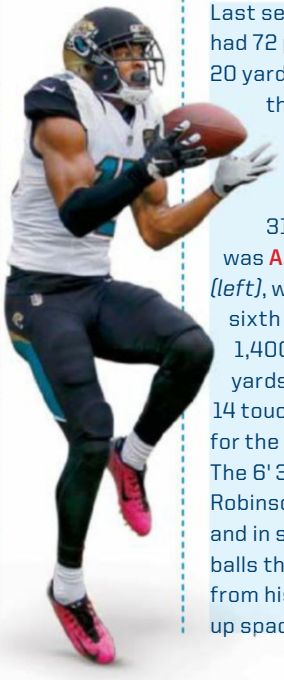
New names promise to punch up the D

Dante Fowler Jr. tried his best to stay positive while rehabbing a torn left ACL last season. But, he says, "I had my little spurts here and there when I would get down on myself." When those low moments came, he sought out the one comfort food that would set him straight. "McDonald's," Fowler says with a smile. "A Big Mac or a Quarter Pounder with fries." This year Fowler is past the pity parties at the drive-thru window. Spend any amount of time with the 22-year-old defensive end and it's clear he can't contain his joy to be back. While answering an unrelated question, Fowler stopped midsentence, put his head into his hands and sighed, "I'm just so happy!"

The No. 3 pick out of Florida in 2015, Fowler joins a unit drastically different from the one he watched last season from a box at EverBank Field. No AFC team did more to rebuild its defense this off-season than the Jaguars, signing tackle Malik Jackson, cornerback Prince Amukamara and safety Tashaun Gipson and drafting Florida State cornerback Jalen Ramsey and UCLA linebacker Myles Jack with their top picks. All five should start at some point this season. They will be led by a new coordinator, Todd Wash, promoted from run-defense coordinator to replace Bob Babich.

Coach Gus Bradley's 12–36 record over three years would have gotten many entire staffs fired in today's win-now NFL. But owner Shahid Khan granted Bradley and general manager Dave Caldwell a fourth year,

DT Malik Jackson



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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

Last season the Jaguars had 72 pass plays of 20 yards or more, tying the Saints for the most in the NFL. The receiver on a league-leading 31 of those plays was Allen Robinson *(left)*, who finished sixth in the NFL with 1,400 receiving yards and caught 14 touchdowns, tied for the league's best. The 6' 3", 218-pound Robinson, long in body and in stride, can snag balls that are away from his frame and eat up space with great build-up speed late in routes. He's a perfect fit for QB Blake Bortles, who has a lively arm but takes time to wind it up. To accommodate his slower release, the Jaguars have built their passing game around downfield play-action routes that take time to unfold—and allow Robinson time to get open. The beauty of play-action is that it's almost always used on early downs, when defenses are in predictable coverages, giving the designs an even greater chance to succeed. —A.B.

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (JACKSON); DON JUAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **7-9**
2015 Record: **5-11**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2		OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 27	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
vs. **GB**	*at* **SD**	*vs.* **BAL**	*vs.* **IND**	BYE	*at* **CHI**	*vs.* **OAK**	*at* **TEN** ON THURSDAY	*at* **KC**	*vs.* **HOU**	*at* **DET**	*at* **BUF**

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in part because of the huge strides made by the offense under quarterback Blake Bortles, who threw for a franchise-record 4,428 yards and 35 touchdowns in 2015. Receivers Allen Robinson and Allen Hurns also emerged as one of the league's top duos; both surpassed 1,000 yards. But the defense didn't do its part, and the Jaguars lost games in which they scored 25, 27, 31 and 39 points. "That was pure disappointment," says veteran middle linebacker Paul Posluszny. "All we have to do is stop the other team a couple of times and we'll be in good shape."

Bortles, who lines up across from this remade unit every day in training camp, says he sees a huge change compared with last season. "The most obvious thing I've noticed is that it just looks better," he said. "Malik Jackson looks like a dominant defensive end in the NFL. When you get off a bus, Malik Jackson is one of the guys you want getting off first."

Fowler has also shown his old pass-rushing burst. The only sign he is 15 months removed from ACL surgery is the camouflage brace he wears on his knee. "To me, he is very Von [Miller]-esque," Jackson says. "I think he can definitely be the same player."

In the secondary Gipson has impressed as a playmaker. Early in OTAs, Bortles threw a familiar route on a double move by tight end Julius Thomas. "We probably threw this 50 times on the defense last year [in practice] for 50 touchdowns," Bortles says. Not this time; Gipson picked it off. "A year ago we didn't have a free safety that could make that play," says Bortles. "Now we've got a guy that can run end line to end line as fast as anybody in the league." The secondary has much room to improve; last year the Jags finished tied for 26th in the league with just nine interceptions and did not get any from their free safeties.

Fowler's stat goal for this season: to average a sack a game. A lofty ambition, but that is the attitude in Jacksonville this season. "The personal expectations are much higher this year, and that is an internal thing," Posluszny says. "That's the first time that I've seen that with Coach Bradley's group. This is our year. We all have that sense of urgency." —*Kalyn Kahler*

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. DEN	*vs.* MIN	*at* HOU	*vs.* TEN ON SATURDAY	*at* IND

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **3-13**
2015 Record: **3-13**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
vs. MIN	*at* DET	*vs.* OAK	*at* HOU	*at* MIA

● = PREDICTED WINNER

4 Tennessee Titans

New backs, new coach . . . new result?

The Titans, who have had losing records the past four seasons, embarked in a new direction when they hired native Tennessean and former Buccaneers and Patriots personnel executive Jon Robinson as general manager in January. At 40, he is bright, experienced and comes with the respect of his former boss in New England, Bill Belichick.

Unfortunately for the Titans, their head coaching pick, announced two days after Robinson's hire, was not as inspiring. Tennessee retained interim coach Mike Mularkey, who went 2–7 last year after Ken Whisenhunt was fired following a 1–6 start.

Mularkey has an 18–39 career record, which includes stints as the coach of the Bills (two seasons) and Jaguars (one), and is 5–27 in his past 32 games. Since the AFL-NFL merger, he is the 16th coach to be given a third opportunity, a group that includes Pete Carroll and John Fox. Why would the Titans retain Mularkey? Continuity for quarterback Marcus Mariota, the No. 2 pick in the 2015 draft, was a factor. But don't underestimate economics: Tennessee still has to pay Whisenhunt, now the Chargers' offensive coordinator, and there have long been rumors (denied by ownership) about a possible sale of the franchise.

So Mularkey, who was given only a three-year deal, may be just a placeholder until either the team is sold or Robinson can land his dream hire. But even if he is a sort of accidental coach, Mularkey's plans can work, if a lot of things go right.

Offensively, the Titans will rely on what Mularkey has dubbed "exotic smashmouth" football. That means they'll be a running team first, an approach that fits their personnel. With the addition of road-grading first-round pick Jack Conklin of Michigan State at right tackle and former Texans center Ben Jones in free agency, Tennessee should be able to

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 27	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27		DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **CLE**	*vs.* **IND**	*vs.* **JAX** ON THURSDAY	*at* **SD**	*vs.* **GB**	*at* **IND**	*at* **CHI**	BYE	*vs.* **DEN**	*at* **KC**	*at* **JAX** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **HOU**

FREDERICK BREEDON/GETTY IMAGES

get some push up front. The ground game is also the forte of left tackle **Taylor Lewan** and right guard **Chance Warmack**.

The Titans now have the backfield to take advantage of that blocking after acquiring **DeMarco Murray** from the Eagles and drafting **Derrick Henry** in the second round. Tennessee's scheme resembles the one Murray excelled in with the Cowboys in '14, when he rushed for a league-leading 1,845 yards. Says Mularkey, "We are going to feature him more from under center and let him do what we've seen him do best." In Henry, the 2015 Heisman Trophy winner from Alabama, the Titans have the perfect understudy for Murray. At 6' 3" and 247 pounds, he is a mammoth between-the-tackles runner with surprisingly quick feet.

With a power running game, Mariota will find more room to run and throw off play-action. The Titans are set at tight end with **Delanie Walker**, who last year set team records at the position with 94 receptions for 1,088 yards. But they need other targets to step forward. No receiver had more than 36 catches in 2015, and as a group the wideouts finished last in the NFL in receptions (130) and second-to-last in yards (1,665 yards). **Kendall Wright** and **Justin Hunter** have shown flashes but aren't consistent. While the Titans signed 35-year-old **Andre Johnson**, they're hoping that the two main receivers will be **Rishard Matthews**, who was underused for four years with the Dolphins, and shifty fifth-round pick **Tajae Sharpe** out of Massachusetts.

Without a passing game that commands respect, defenses will stack up against the run, and Mularkey's designs will go nowhere. *—Greg A. Bedard*

↑ **RB** DeMarco Murray

TMMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Take a gander at **Jurrell Casey**, and you see a bowling ball with arms and legs. You'd never guess that the 6' 1" 305-pounder is one of the most versatile defensive players in football. Casey, a sixth-year tackle from USC, gets off the snap quickly, and he has a knack for getting under a blocker's pads and disengaging from contact. He can change directions extremely well in confined areas, and he finishes plays with authority. Last season legendary Steelers defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau took over Tennessee's unit and used Casey in a variety of ways. In addition to lining up inside, he occasionally set up wide off the edge and, even more surprisingly, sometimes stood up as a roving blitzer—and he looked good doing it, underlining the disconnect between his appearance and his play. Now that Casey has experience in LeBeau's scheme, don't be surprised if his role expands in 2016. —A.B.

1 Kansas City Chiefs

To win it all you must roll the dice

Just three minutes and 17 seconds into the preseason, the Chiefs had a play that illustrated exactly who quarterback Alex Smith is, and why that might not be best for tight end Travis Kelce.

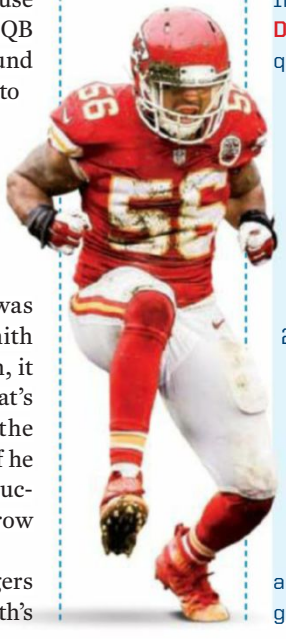
On third-and-nine from the Seattle 21, Smith dropped back to pass. Kelce found a soft spot in the zone, about 12 yards downfield. Smith saw Kelce and started to throw, but he pulled the ball back because a defensive lineman obstructed his view. So the QB rolled to his left, kept the play alive and then found wide receiver Jeremy Maclin at the one-yard line to set up a touchdown.

Many—including Smith's coaches—would view that play as a victory. But it also demonstrated a shortcoming, because Kansas City needs him to be more daring and to make more use of Kelce if it's to become a Super Bowl contender.

"I was really trying to find him inside, and it was there when I looked at the sideline pictures," Smith said after the game. "If I had thrown it, though, it definitely would have been batted, it felt like. That's why I ended up tucking it and getting out to the left." This is what Smith does. He's risk-averse. If he doesn't see a throw with a high percentage of success, he'll scramble, roll out, check down or throw the ball away.

Over the past three seasons only Aaron Rodgers (1.37) had a lower interception percentage than Smith's

QB
Alex Smith



The MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

In 2015 inside linebacker Derrick Johnson *(left)* quietly had one of the most remarkable seasons in the NFL, with 116 tackles, four sacks and two interceptions. At 33 and coming off a torn right Achilles suffered in Week 1 of 2014, Johnson showed no drop in the fluidity and swiftness that has long made him one of the game's best all-around run defenders. As he's aged, his football awareness has only grown. The Chiefs, like many teams seeking greater coverage versatility, prefer to play a "big dime" package featuring three cornerbacks, three safeties and one linebacker. The danger of doing so is that the undersized defense can be vulnerable to the run, even against an offense in a spread formation. Having a 6' 3", 242-pound 'backer with awareness and multidirectional movement skills like Johnson offsets much of that risk. —A.B.

AJ MAST (SMITH); REED HOFFMANN/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **11–5**
2015 Record: **11–5**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2		OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
vs. **SD**	*at* **HOU**	*vs.* **NYJ**	*at* **PIT**	BYE	*at* **OAK**	*vs.* **NO**	*at* **IND**	*vs.* **JAX**	*at* **CAR**	*vs.* **TB**	*at* **DEN**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

(1.39). Tom Brady (1.47) is third on the list. But Rodgers and Brady are both willing to take greater risks. According to Pro Football Focus, last year they were among the 24 quarterbacks who attempted more than Smith's 17 "big-time throws."

In many ways that's fine. The Chiefs have gone from consecutive losing seasons in 2011 and '12 to records of 11–5, 9–7 and 11–5 under coach Andy Reid (with a wild-card win over the Texans last season) because Smith has played conservatively. With both a scoring defense and a rushing offense (in yards per attempt) that have ranked in the top five in each of the past three years, Smith might seem ideal for the Chiefs.

But can he make them viable title contenders? Only if he continues (he made some progress last year) to take more chances. The Chiefs have to get better on third down; in 2015 they had the seventh-worst conversion rate on third-down passes (31.9%).

That's where Kelce comes in. He may not be much of a blocker, but he's 6' 5" and 260 pounds with a huge wingspan. He's also quick off the line and has flexibility, which makes him a tough cover for linebackers over the middle. Big things were expected of Kelce in 2015, his third season. But his stats—72 catches, 875 yards and five touchdowns—only improved modestly from the previous year. He was voted to his first Pro Bowl, but it wasn't the breakout season many envisioned.

Games, especially in the postseason, are about matchups. No one can create mismatches for K.C. better than Kelce. But he works best down the middle of the field, where Smith, when he looks for his tight end, will see more defenders and a higher potential for turnovers. The Chiefs have tried to work around that by moving Kelce all over the formation—at flanker and at slot receiver, even in the backfield. That's fine in the regular season and on first or second down, but on money plays when you need to keep the chains moving against the best defenses in the playoffs, Smith is going to have to pull the trigger to Kelce down the middle. *—Greg A. Bedard*

DEC. 4	DEC. 8	DEC. 18	DEC. 25	JAN. 1
at **ATL**	*vs.* **OAK** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **TEN**	*vs.* **DEN**	*at* **SD**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **10–6**
2015 Record: **4–12**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
at **KC**	*vs.* **JAX**	*at* **IND**	*vs.* **NO**	*at* **OAK**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 San Diego Chargers

Up to their old tricks again (fingers crossed)

After a full morning of practice followed by a brief but intense weightlifting session, a sweat-soaked Antonio Gates emerged from the Chargers' locker room to a swarm of young autograph seekers.

"How you doin', man?" he said to one boy in a Keenan Allen jersey, seemingly the group's ringleader. "You so big now!"

"And *you're* getting big," the boy shot back.

The 36-year-old Gates smiled. Rare is the season that the three-time All-Pro tight end, still a tough assignment, doesn't open himself to remarks about his physique. Five years ago he was memorably dismissed by an anonymous source on his own team as "old and fat." Then last year, just when a slimmed-down Gates seemed to have shaken off his critics, he was found in violation of the league's performance-enhancing-drug policy and suspended for the first four games.

Without Gates's sure hands and steadying presence, San Diego stumbled early in 2015, at one point dropping six straight to wind up 4–12, its worst finish since 2003. The record was as much due to a lack of chemistry along the offensive line as it was to the scarcity of playmakers beyond Gates. Although versatile tailback Danny Woodhead helped keep the chains moving, the Bolts keenly felt the absence of Allen, a Pro Bowl receiver who missed eight games with a lacerated kidney. They piled up yards easily enough but ranked 26th in scoring as opponents blanketed Gates in the red zone. This put too much pressure on a defense that struggled to generate sacks and turnovers. Nine of San Diego's 12 losses came by eight or fewer points, and fourth-year coach Mike McCoy nearly lost his job.

To survive, he fired offensive coordinator Frank Reich and hired his predecessor, Ken Whisenhunt, who was available after receiving a pink slip midway through his second year as Titans coach. Whisenhunt

OCT. 13 *vs.* **DEN** ON THURSDAY | OCT. 23 *at* **ATL** | OCT. 30 *at* **DEN** | NOV. 6 *vs.* **TEN** | NOV. 13 *vs.* **MIA** | BYE | NOV. 27 *at* **HOU** | DEC. 4 *vs.* **TB** | DEC. 11 *at* **CAR** | DEC. 18 *vs.* **OAK** | DEC. 24 *at* **CLE** ON SATURDAY | JAN. 1 *vs.* **KC**

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Last season **Jason Verrett**, San Diego's 2014 first-round pick, out of Texas Christian, proved himself to be the rare corner who can cover No. 1 receivers one-on-one. His body control and understanding of coverage angles were outstanding. The 5'10", 188-pound Verrett is also nimble enough to cover his man if he shifts into the slot, and that opens up another range of possibilities for the entire defense. Because San Diego's other corners—Casey Hayward, who was signed from Green Bay this off-season, and returning veteran Brandon Flowers—also have slot skills, the Bolts can now play a true man-to-man, with each corner matched to a specific receiver no matter where he lines up. Defensive coordinator John Pagano prefers a scheme built on deception and aggression. Expect to see much of that with this trio, led by its top-shelf star. —A.B.

had helped the Chargers create their current system, using an aggressive play-calling style that doesn't really change with personnel, to turn them into a statistical juggernaut. Says Gates, "He makes puzzle pieces fit that other coaches don't think go together."

Off-season roster moves should help the cause. Free-agent center **Matt Slauson** (late of the Bears) upgrades the pass protection and run blocking. Their sixth-round pick, fullback **Derek Watt**, younger brother of J.J., was the lead blocker at Wisconsin for a back who came 41 yards short of the single-season FBS rushing record set by Barry Sanders. That back's name? **Melvin Gordon**, San Diego's 2015 first-round draft choice, who was supposed to carry the offense last year. Instead, he struggled and sat out two games with an injured left knee.

The Badgers' reunion both restores Gordon's confidence—"We're already back in our groove," says Watt—and returns the Chargers to their roots as a power running team (fullbacks have cleared the way for every 1,000-yard rusher since 2001) that can also sling it. Such balance figures to help a D that, notwithstanding the protracted holdout of Ohio State defensive end **Joey Bosa**, the No. 3 pick, is better for the additions of tackle **Brandon Mebane** (Seahawks) and safety **Dwight Lowery**—the Colts' free agent who has the unenviable task of replacing Eric Weddle, now with the Ravens. As much as Weddle's leadership and on-field acumen will be missed, young stars like end **Corey Liguet** and cornerback **Jason Verrett** have shown themselves capable.

So has Gates, the oldest Charger. If he stays fit and his teammates pull their weight? There's no reason San Diego can't turn back time. —*Andrew Lawrence*

↑ **TE** Antonio Gates

DENIS POROY/AP

3 Oakland Raiders

Making the secondary a primary concern

A half hour after the Raiders' fourth training camp practice in Napa, Calif., **Sean Smith** sits back in his chair under a tent, taking pulls on a sports drink. A cooling breeze rolls off the Mayacamas Mountains to the west. "Mid-70s, no humidity," says Smith with a smile, soaking in his new surroundings. "I've seen worse."

He is clearly happy to be here, but not as happy as Oakland fans are to have him. This off-season the Raiders signed Smith away from the Chiefs for four years and $38 million, acquiring not only a true shutdown corner but also an emphatic solution to the team's biggest weakness. Oakland had the league's seventh-worst pass defense in 2015, allowing 258.8 yards per game. A large part of the problem was '13 first-round pick **D.J. Hayden**, one of the NFL's most frequently burned corners last season. In fact, the team's best cornerback, by far, was **David Amerson**, who arrived in Week 3 after being cut by the Redskins.

At 6' 3" and 220 pounds, Smith fits comfortably into Oakland's tradition of long, physical bump-and-run corners. The eight-year veteran's physique is so solid that at certain angles he resembles an outside linebacker. "He has such a wide radius and such long arms," says defensive backs coach Marcus Robertson. "If he gets his hands on you, he's got a chance to take you out of the play because most quarterbacks won't wait to see if [the smothered receiver] can win. They've got that clock in their head." That clock will

CB
Sean Smith

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

When the Raiders shelled out $25.4 million guaranteed in free agency in March for **Kelechi Osemele** *(left)*, many thought they would try to maximize their return on investment by moving him from left guard to the more valued position of left tackle. Late last season the injury-depleted Ravens actually had to play the 6' 5", 330-pound Osemele at that tackle spot, and he wasn't bad. Still, Oakland smartly understood that it was better off keeping him inside, where he is utterly dominant. Osemele is phenomenal blocking on the move, and he gives the Raiders an interior offensive line that is second only to the Cowboys' in mobility. Center Rodney Hudson is quick. Oakland's other guard, Gabe Jackson, is not, but he moves efficiently at 335 pounds. Having three mobile blockers up the middle will be of great help to Latavius Murray, a running back who must have his rushing lanes clearly defined. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **9–7**
2015 Record: **7–9**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6		NOV. 21	NOV. 27
at **NO**	*vs.* **ATL**	*at* **TEN**	*at* **BAL**	*vs.* **SD**	*vs.* **KC**	*at* **JAX**	*at* **TB**	*vs.* **DEN**	BYE	*vs.* **HOU** MON., MEXICO CITY	*vs.* **CAR**

= PREDICTED WINNER

NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES (2)

only get faster with budding superstar Khalil Mack (15 sacks last year) and former Seahawk Bruce Irvin coming off the edges.

Based on what Smith had heard before he got to Oakland, he assumed his new team "must not be that good in the secondary." Upon arriving, he realized, he says, that "this [secondary] is loaded with talent. It's just that they were inexperienced." To ease those pains, the 29-year-old Smith has shared "some simple things that can make life so much easier."

Such as? "Well, wide receiver splits—where a guy lines up in relation to the numbers," he says. "If a receiver has a plus-three-yard split outside the numbers, he can't run every route on the route tree. When he's out that wide, you can erase half the routes. If he's condensed, now you're thinking *these* routes. You don't have to cover the whole route tree, so stop stressing."

GM Reggie McKenzie also filled both safety spots in the off-season by signing 10-year veteran Reggie Nelson, who is coming off an eight-interception, Pro Bowl season with the Bengals, and drafting Karl Joseph out of West Virginia with the No. 14 pick. Joseph ran with the first team throughout the preseason and will start on Day One. Serious, sober people have already started comparing him with Earl Thomas, Seattle's three-time All-Pro. Hayden, meanwhile, will move to slot corner. Early reviews on him there were guarded, but good.

Between their youthful core and veteran additions such as Smith, the Raiders have their swag back and are a stylish pick to challenge for the division title. Simmer down, everyone, says play-by-play man Greg Papa: "This is still a young team." Talented as he is, third-year quarterback Derek Carr needs to take better care of the ball in crunch time—"needs to know when to be O.K. with a par and not go for birdie," Papa says.

At least if this group needs more time, they'll get it: Owner Mark Davis is far more patient than his late, swashbuckling father. In late July he signed McKenzie to a four-year extension. But the club *should* have its first winning record in 14 years. Whether the team makes the postseason or not, Oakland fans will easily be able to say, We've seen worse. —A.M.

DEC. 4	DEC. 8	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **BUF**	*at* **KC** ON THURSDAY	*at* **SD**	*vs.* **IND** ON SATURDAY	*at* **DEN**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **9-7**
2015 Record: **12-4**

SEPT. 8	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
vs. **CAR** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **IND**	*at* **CIN**	*at* **TB**	*vs.* **ATL**

= PREDICTED WINNER

4 Denver Broncos

A D like this couldn't get better—*right?*

The best player on the best defense in pro football had not even washed the champagne off his championship ring when he proclaimed that "we could be even better" in 2016. That's Von Miller: disrupter of offenses, stalker of quarterbacks, MVP of Super Bowl 50 and now the highest-paid nonquarterback in NFL history (new deal: six years, $114.5 million, up to $70 million guaranteed).

While pundits focused on which defenders the Broncos lost—linebacker Danny Trevathan to the Bears and defensive tackle Malik Jackson to the Jaguars—Miller fixated on how they secured their playoff victories. Denver allowed all of 44 points in three postseason triumphs, stifling three of the NFL's top quarterbacks in Ben Roethlisberger, Tom Brady and Cam Newton. The Broncos' 194 yards of total offense in the Super Bowl marked the fewest ever by a winning team. It didn't matter. Papa John could have subbed for his buddy Peyton Manning at quarterback and they would still have orange-crushed the Panthers.

Denver's D remains stocked with Pro Bowl–caliber players: three shutdown corners in Aqib Talib (recovering from an off-season gunshot wound suffered at a club in Dallas), Chris Harris Jr. and Bradley Roby; a hard-hitting safety in T.J. Ward; an athletic linebacker in Brandon Marshall; and pass rushers (Miller, DeMarcus Ware, Shane Ray, Shaquil Barrett) who make opposing quarterbacks want to call in sick. "We're a group where each guy could get more than eight sacks," Ray says.

Sure, Ware turned 34 in July, missed five games last season and was shelved early in camp by a back injury. But coaches expect his role to become more specialized (think: third down, around 15 snaps a game), as Ray and Barrett assume added responsibility. Denver used the 23rd pick in the 2015 draft on Ray for that reason, and he packed on 10 pounds of muscle this

OCT. 13	OCT. 24	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13		NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 25	JAN. 1
at **SD** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **HOU** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **SD**	*at* **OAK**	*at* **NO**	BYE	*vs.* **KC**	*at* **JAX**	*at* **TEN**	*vs.* **NE**	*at* **KC**	*vs.* **OAK**

JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

off-season so that he can rotate some inside. "I did that in college," Ray says of his time at Missouri. "I had no problem beating guards. I feel like if a tackle can't block me, a guard sure can't."

Last year the Broncos started two safeties with similar skill sets in Ward and **Darian Stewart**. The addition of 6' 2", 202-pound **Justin Simmons**, a third-round pick from Boston College, gives them more flexibility at the back end. In some packages all three will be on the field.

Of course, none of the defenders can throw the football, and Denver's repeat chances will hinge in part on its quarterback play. With Manning retired and Brock Osweiler, who started seven games last year in relief, having signed with the Texans, the options are **Mark Sanchez** (a journeyman off-season acquisition), **Trevor Siemian** (a seventh-rounder in 2015) and first-round rookie **Paxton Lynch** from Memphis, the QB of the future who isn't expected to play much this season. One of those three will now direct an offense that, unsteady as it was last year, still ranked 14th in passing yards and 16th overall.

The Patriots are the last team to win back-to-back Super Bowls, in the 2003 and '04 seasons, and the Broncos pose an interesting attempt at succession. As they opened camp, Jay Z's *On to the Next One* echoed across the practice fields on a cloudless day in Colorado. Receiver **Demaryius Thomas** was snagging passes after an uneven, drop-marred 2015. Sanchez looked sharp, if not spectacular. But their chances of repeating as champions will depend on making history. As Ward says, "We can become one of the best defenses of all time."

—Greg Bishop

↑ **LB** Shane Ray

MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

O.K., *crumbles* may be an impossibility for a unit this loaded. But the Broncos' strategy in the Super Bowl showed the sort of freedom that cornerback **Chris Harris Jr.** gives them. When the Panthers played three wide receivers, they did so expecting Denver to sub out a linebacker for a third corner. Instead, the Broncos subbed a safety, which kept their hybrid front seven intact and negated the advantage that Carolina hoped to create for its running game. This was huge, and it was only possible because Denver has three first-class corners who can cover one-on-one. The key CB is Harris, who shadows the quickest, and usually most versatile, wide receiver. Not only is he suffocating on the outside, but he's also so comfortable inside that he'll align at linebacker in the rare instances when his receiver goes into the backfield. Von Miller is the MVP up front, but Harris is the main man at the back end. —A.B.

1 Dallas Cowboys

A fantastic five shall lead the way

The root of most of the Cowboys' troubles in 2015 can be easily pinpointed: In the 12 games that quarterback Tony Romo missed because of a broken left collarbone they went 1–11; in the four games he started they were 3–1. Just having a healthy Romo throwing to All-Pro receiver Dez Bryant (who missed seven games due to a broken right foot) would help an offense that last year finished 31st in scoring.

The defense, however, also struggled. It came up with only 11 takeaways and 31 sacks in 2015, ranking last and tied for 25th in the NFL, respectively. Though corner Orlando Scandrick returns after missing all of '15 with a right ACL tear, at the start of this season Dallas will be without three starters due to suspensions: linebacker Rolando McClain (10 games) and defensive ends Demarcus Lawrence (four games) and Randy Gregory (four games). Dallas's D will clearly be a work in progress this year.

The defensive issues were no secret to coach Jason Garrett, owner Jerry Jones and his son Stephen, the team's vice president, when they met at the beginning of the year to discuss how they wanted to build their 2016 roster. But when they didn't see a difference-making pass rusher available, they chose to change their off-season emphasis. "The biggest thing that kept coming up was that the strength of the team was clearly our

QB Tony Romo

The MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

If the Cowboys are to regain their form of 2014, when their running backs averaged a league-best 142.9 yards per game, they'll need 1) Tony Romo back healthy, calling run-play audibles at the line of scrimmage and 2) improved play from the most talented O-line in football. The group's headliner is the spring-footed left tackle Tyron Smith. But the keystone is 25-year-old center Travis Frederick *(left)*. Dallas is primarily an outside zone running team, which requires the front five to stretch blocks toward the sideline and pin defenders back inside. The center's job is the most difficult: Not only must he snap the ball before firing into his block, but opponents also align their largest D-linemen over his head or shoulder. Frederick is one of the NFL's best at quickly getting around that defender. He'll need to keep up that pace in '16 to get the Dallas run game back on track. —A.B.

LYNNE SLADKY/AP (ROMO); RIC TAPIA/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **10–6**
2015 Record: **4–12**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16		OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 24
vs. **NYG**	*at* **WAS**	*vs.* **CHI**	*at* **SF**	*vs.* **CIN**	*at* **GB**	BYE	*vs.* **PHI**	*at* **CLE**	*at* **PIT**	*vs.* **BAL**	*vs.* **WAS** ON THURSDAY

● = PREDICTED WINNER

offensive line," Stephen Jones says. "So [we asked], 'How do we take advantage of that?' "

Their answer: Draft Ohio State's **Ezekiel Elliott** with the fourth pick, the highest Dallas had taken a running back since choosing Hall of Famer Tony Dorsett second in 1977. The Cowboys' view was that adding Elliott gives them a trio of capable runners (with **Darren McFadden** and free-agent pickup **Alfred Morris** from Washington), which will allow the offense to take even greater control of the time of possession—Dallas ranked 13th last year—and keep the beleaguered defense off the field. The addition of Elliott could also help the 36-year-old Romo stay healthy. One of the rookie's many appealing traits: In 108 pass-blocking snaps for the Buckeyes in 2015 he allowed just one quarterback pressure.

For the most part, though, the 6-foot, 225-pound Elliott is in Dallas to take advantage of others' blocking. The offensive line, which comprises five homegrown starters, ranked as the best run-blocking and pass-blocking unit last year, according to Pro Football Focus. Over the past two seasons Dallas has rushed for 4,244 yards, good for third most in the NFL, while getting only 180 of those yards from its quarterbacks. (Compare that with a combined 2,577 QB rushing yards for the two higher-ranked teams, the Seahawks and the Panthers.) Last year it was McFadden who benefited the most from the team's dominant hogs, as he rushed for 1,089 yards—nearly doubling his average over his previous four seasons in Oakland.

The talent on the O-line allows for simplicity in scheme. In 2015 the Cowboys ran outside zone on 47.7% of their handoffs, the fifth-highest rate in the league, while their second-most frequent run play was the blast. These two basic rushing plays are found in every NFL playbook. "We definitely don't try to trick anyone," says right guard **Zack Martin**, one of the line's three All-Pros.

But if the line carries the team as far as the Cowboys think it can, that will be an impressive trick indeed. —B.B.

DEC. 1	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 26	JAN. 1
at **MIN** ON THURSDAY	*at* **NYG**	*vs.* **TB**	*vs.* **DET** ON MONDAY	*at* **PHI**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **8-8**
2015 Record: **6-10**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 3	OCT. 9
at **DAL**	*vs.* **NO**	*vs.* **WAS**	*at* **MIN** MONDAY	*at* **GB**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 New York Giants

The D's return to respectability begins

On the walls of the Giants' defensive meeting room hang images of Big Blue greats from yesteryear. To help his current players appreciate the franchise's celebrated history, coordinator **Steve Spagnuolo** has started a new tradition—a homework assignment of sorts.

During meetings early in camp Spagnuolo would point to one of his defenders and assign him a jersey number that corresponded to one of the players on the wall. The next day the current Giant would have to stand in front of his teammates and give a brief presentation about the former one: his background, his college career and, most important, how he fit into the franchise's pantheon.

"There is a great defensive tradition here," says strong safety **Landon Collins**, "and we want to keep that tradition alive. If you are not doing that, then what are you playing on the Giants for?"

Last season New York did not hold up that tradition; for the first time since 1965 its defense ranked last in the NFL. Worse, the team missed the playoffs for the fourth year in a row. As a result it parted ways with coach Tom Coughlin after 12 seasons and two Super Bowl victories, and promoted offensive coordinator **Ben McAdoo**.

The 39-year-old McAdoo has preached that the Giants need "evolution, not revolution" and has kept many of his mentor's tenets. The team still runs on CST (Coughlin Standard Time, i.e., five minutes early), and most tweaks have been minor: Texts have replaced emails; the rest day has moved from Tuesday to Monday; the weight room has been refurbished; players wake up later and start practicing earlier.

"If it was working, we left it alone; and if it wasn't working, we changed it. We didn't feel we needed to change the whole program," McAdoo says. "Tradition is important here. But tradition offers no guarantees."

The Giants knew they needed more than a history

OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 14	NOV. 20	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 22	JAN. 1
vs. **BAL**	*at* **LA** IN LONDON	BYE	*vs.* **PHI**	*vs.* **CIN** MONDAY	*vs.* **CHI**	*at* **CLE**	*at* **PIT**	*vs.* **DAL**	*vs.* **DET**	*at* **PHI** THURSDAY	*at* **WAS**

THE MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

When your top receiver is the best in the world at tracking balls downfield and getting in and out of breaks, defenses are going to center their game plans around containing him. Just knowing this is an advantage to the Giants and their veteran QB, who excels at identifying mismatches and adjusting before the snap. First-year coach Ben McAdoo's scheme uses three-WR formations regularly. When the offense spreads out, so does the defense, revealing where double teams are likely headed. Aligning **Odell Beckham Jr.** wide often forces a safety to shade that way, leaving receivers one-on-one on the other side or down the middle. This is how average receivers can be made to look great. Big Blue won't always keep Beckham wide, of course. They'll also put him in the slot or backfield, forcing a linebacker to double-team him instead of a safety. The more ways they use him, the more pressure opposing defenses feel. —A.B.

↑ **DE** Jason Pierre-Paul

EVAN PINKUS/AP

lesson. They needed an influx of talent. So in the offseason the team spent $204 million on four defensive free agents, allocating 69% of that money to the line in re-signing end **Jason Pierre-Paul** and bringing over tackle **Damon (Snacks) Harrison** and end **Olivier Vernon** from the Jets and the Dolphins, respectively.

Harrison was rated as the best run-stopping D-lineman in the NFL last year by Pro Football Focus; Vernon's 81 combined sacks, hits and hurries were second most in the NFL. When you add in tackle **Johnathan Hankins** (seven sacks in 2014), now healthy after suffering a torn pectoral last year, and account for Pierre-Paul, who has shed the protective wrap on his mangled right hand, which hindered his tackling ability in '15, New York has gone from one of the NFL's worst D-lines to potentially one of the best.

The onus will now be on the pass rush to set the tone for what is shaping up to be an incredibly aggressive unit. Both starting corners, **Janoris Jenkins** (signed from the Rams) and **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie**, are boom-or-bust defenders. And while the team is still shallow at linebacker and safety, the belief is that a dominant pass rush can help cover up those deficiencies.

There are fewer questions about the offense, which has ranked in the top 10 in each of the two seasons McAdoo has run it. The fulcrum is one of the top quarterback-receiver duos in the NFL: **Eli Manning**, who is coming off his best statistical season, and **Odell Beckham Jr.**, who is still improving after a record-setting start to his career.

Tradition offers no guarantees, as McAdoo says, but a return to defensive glory would put Big Blue on the path back to contention. —B.B.

3 Philadelphia Eagles

Install an offense, pick a QB—*tick, tock*

Training camp in Philadelphia looked, well . . . *different*. There were huddles and play calls and snap counts, audibles at the line, even coaches halting the action to correct mistakes. And while this would not be noteworthy at any other practice, at any level, for the Eagles it marked a drastic change from the past three camps, where Chip Kelly operated his unique system at a breakneck pace. "[The differences] are seen every day," says center **Jason Kelce**. "In the old system—not just in practice, but also in meetings—everything was set up to go as fast as possible. And it created a rushed feeling."

When that failed to pay off, Philadelphia fired Kelly, then purged all vestiges of the deposed leader. The team hired a replacement in **Doug Pederson**, who brought his quasi–West Coast offense from Kansas City. Things are slowed down in Pederson's O—there's some no-huddle, but it's used as a change of pace, not a way of life—and the quarterback bears much more responsibility. Play calls are verbose and the QB has the latitude to scan the D and adjust, none of which existed in Kelly's system.

Who'll be under center is another matter. **Sam Bradford** should get the nod in Week 1, but it's worth noting that early in camp he split snaps equally with free agent **Chase Daniel** (Chiefs) and No. 2 pick **Carson Wentz** (North Dakota State). Which, financially,

TE
Zach Ertz

The MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

In June, when the Eagles gave **Fletcher Cox** *(left)* a six-year, $102.6 million extension ($63.3 million guaranteed), pundits gasped—but Cox is worth every penny. Aside from J.J. Watt, no pure D-lineman is more explosive in his initial step after disengaging a block. And like Watt, Cox (who has outstanding quickness off the snap and a hearty reserve of brute strength) is tremendous at disengaging from blocks. For his first four seasons Cox played on an Eagles D that used myriad looks up front and at times left him with the thankless job of simply trying to hold ground against two blockers. New coordinator Jim Schwartz is changing that with a true 4-3 scheme and fewer fronts, which will put the 6' 4", 310-pound Cox in all-out attack mode. The Eagles are good but not great at D-end. Normally that's not enough. But it can be when you have a D-tackle like Cox, who consistently penetrates or demands extra attention. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **7–9**
2015 Record: **7–9**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 19	SEPT. 25		OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 28
vs. **CLE**	*at* **CHI** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **PIT**	BYE	*at* **DET**	*at* **WAS**	*vs.* **MIN**	*at* **DAL**	*at* **NYG**	*vs.* **ATL**	*at* **SEA**	*vs.* **GB** ON MONDAY

= PREDICTED WINNER

MICHAEL PEREZ/AP (ERTZ); AL TIELEMANS/AP

makes sense: Each passer is among the top 27 highest-paid at the position in terms of guaranteed money.

If fans had their way, Philly would move on quickly to the 23-year-old Wentz, who Pederson said might not even be active on game days. Daniel, 29, may be the forgotten man of the trio, but he is the most familiar with the offense as a result of three seasons with Pederson in K.C. That means he's been given the awkward task of helping Bradford and Wentz learn the scheme. Not that he seems to mind. "Everyone is helping everyone," he says, "but it's going to take some time."

Right. *Time*. For a franchise with a notoriously impatient fan base, a franchise that hasn't won a playoff game in seven seasons, time may not be on anyone's side. Bradford did set team records for completions and completion percentage in 2015, and he looked strong in his final seven starts as he finally seemed to grasp Kelly's scheme—but what does that mean now? Pederson's will be the fourth system of Bradford's seven-year career.

If this is the one that fits—and it's clear that players are enamored with the freedom it affords them—then this offense could be potent. Third-year wideout Jordan Matthews has more receptions over his first two seasons (152) than any player in franchise history; receiver Nelson Agholor, the 2015 first-round pick, is primed to bounce back after a rookie season spent nursing a high left-ankle sprain; versatile back Darren Sproles should thrive in the pass-catching role Jamaal Charles played for Pederson with the Chiefs; and tight end Zach Ertz, who set an Eagles record with 30 catches over a three-game stretch at the end of last season, will be lining up all over the field. Unleashed, a thriving O could also help Jim Schwartz's revamped D (now a 4–3), which led the NFL in time spent on the field each of Kelly's three seasons, thanks to the coach's frenetic pace.

Ultimately, the questions with Bradford will be how quickly he can pick up Pederson's system and whether he can stay healthy: He has played a full 16 games *once* the past five years. If Plan A fails, Pederson will have to decide whether to try to salvage the season with Daniel or plan for the future with Wentz. The clock, as always, will be ticking. —B.B.

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 22	JAN. 1
at **CIN**	*vs.* **WAS**	*at* **BAL**	*vs.* **NYG** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **DAL**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **7–9**
2015 Record: **9–7**

SEPT. 12	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
vs. **PIT** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **DAL**	*at* **NYG**	*vs.* **CLE**	*at* **BAL**

= PREDICTED WINNER

4 Washington Redskins

An extraordinary cast lifts a regular QB

After signing Kirk Cousins to a one-year, $20 million deal under the franchise tag, GM Scot McCloughan gave his quarterback an additional guarantee: "We're going to build this roster to where you can be average and still be good." That's what McCloughan did for Russell Wilson as a member of Seattle's front office, and that's what McCloughan has done during his first two years in D.C., reinforcing the offensive line and receiving corps.

That strategy paid off last season: Cousins completed a league-leading 69.8% of his passes, while his wideouts more than held up their end of the bargain. Just look at Cousins's game-winning TD to an outstretched Pierre Garçon in Week 4. After Garçon took a hit to deliver a victory over the Eagles, Cousins ran over to him on the sideline. "I thanked him, gave him a pat on the helmet, told him how great he is," Cousins recalls, "but the nature of the NFL is the very next week, I ask him to do it again."

And in this case, the next year as well. The top eight pass catchers return, including big-play wideout DeSean Jackson, back from hamstring and knee injuries that dragged down his 2015 numbers. At running back, bruising second-year man Matt Jones (who ran for 490 yards but averaged a meager 3.4 per carry in his rookie season) replaces Alfred Morris as the starter. Such continuity can only help Cousins. "In OTAs you noticed it with being able to install the offense and not having to slow down," he says. "We can start to expand upon those plays and [add] wrinkles."

Third-year coach Jay Gruden sees the benefits too. He has been moving around more during practices, speaking to players individually and even jumping into a few drills now that he feels comfortable with his assistants. And once the season starts, he intends to open up the offense. "Last year, we had so many

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30		NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 24	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 19	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **PHI**	*at* **DET**	*at* **CIN**	BYE	*vs.* **MIN**	*vs.* **GB**	*at* **DAL** ON THURSDAY	*at* **ARI**	*at* **PHI**	*vs.* **CAR** ON MONDAY	*at* **CHI** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **NYG**

MIKE MCCARN/AP

new players, we were maybe a little more conservative early in the season," Gruden says. "I think we can be in attack mode early."

After much shuffling this time a year ago, the O-line is set, giving the modern-day Hogs time to focus on their relationships. Left tackle **Trent Williams** invited them all to train in Houston, where they did footwork drills in matching T-shirts until Williams wanted to throw up—and then laughed about it over dinner. During OTAs alone, right tackle **Morgan Moses** and right guard **Brandon Scherff** talked more than they had during all of last season, Moses says. Tight end **Jordan Reed** says he's seen the line grow tighter. He's also felt his QB become more trusting. "He's going to give me opportunities that he might not have given me in the past," Reed says. "Sometimes if it's tight coverage, he'll still try to fit it in to me."

Cousins is banking on Reed's ability to make those tough catches, as he did last year. The QB's reputation—and future earnings—will be a function of the team's success, but he says that is nothing new. He may be making more money now, but this is just another season for Cousins to hit his targets and hope for the best.

"It's common sense going back to Pop Warner football that a quarterback is only as good as the guys around him," the quarterback says. "I've always known that and understood that I'm a reflection of the team, so I'm just grateful to be on a team that has a lot of returning pieces in place, and it gives me a chance to be successful." If McCloughan has held up his end of the bargain, all Cousins needs to do is be average. The rest will take care of itself. —J.F.

↑ **WR** DeSean Jackson

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

The Redskins have one of the most creative downfield passing schemes in the NFL, and the biggest reason is 26-year-old tight end **Jordan Reed**. A third-round pick in 2013, Reed has blossomed into the preeminent route runner at his position, and it's not even close. Coaches tend to pause when describing Reed because they can't help but make awkward comparisons with Aaron Hernandez, Reed's predecessor at Florida. Like Hernandez, Reed has an uncanny smoothness. No linebacker and few safeties can guard him one-on-one; even corners find him to be a handful. Washington builds formations around the mismatches Reed creates. You'll often see him split wide, forcing the defense to tip its hand: If a safety lines up across from him, it's likely man-to-man; if it's a corner, it's zone. Kirk Cousins not only benefits from that presnap information but also from having Reed in a favorable matchup outside. —A.B.

1 Green Bay Packers

Living on the edge in Titletown, U.S.A.

Coach Mike McCarthy is flipping through a laminated binder the size and weight of a Denny's menu—his call sheet from last January's cardiac-arresting 26–20 NFC divisional-round loss to the Cardinals. After Aaron Rodgers tied that game with another truth-is-stranger-than-fiction Hail Mary, McCarthy approached his QB. "I'm thinking about going for two," he told Rodgers, whose expression conveyed skepticism. With Randall Cobb injured, the receiving corps was down to gray-beard James Jones, second-year man Jared Abbrederis and seventh-round pick Jeff Janis. If Green Bay went for two, those wideouts would have been running a play they'd never practiced. The Pack kicked the extra point and lost in overtime.

Cobb, a huge part of that game plan, had been knocked out early with a bruised lung. "This is the page I wanted to be on," says McCarthy, pointing to a chunk of plays designed for number 18. "And *this*"—pointing to another—"is the page I had to live on."

On which page will Green Bay spend this season? Much of that will depend on the health of the men running under Rodgers's passes. Cobb is back. So too, it seemed, was Jordy Nelson, Rodgers's most effective deep threat. After a torn right ACL sidelined him for all of 2015, Nelson was on schedule to rejoin the team for training camp. Alas, a self-described "hiccup"—a minor off-season issue with his *left* knee—resulted in his being placed on the PUP list. Asked about the hiccup, Nelson is

QB Aaron Rodgers

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

For the past year and a half Clay Matthews *(left)* has been a good soldier and filled the perpetually iffy inside linebacker position in the Packers' defense. There he faced more blocks, took on more coverage assignments and enjoyed less glamour than he would have rushing off the edge. In 2016 he returns to his natural outside spot. But if Green Bay strategizes wisely—and coordinator Dom Capers usually does—then on critical passing downs Matthews will see plenty of action back inside. One of the founding fathers of the venerated zone-blitz, Capers often rushes his linebackers right up the middle. That's the shortest path to the quarterback—and if the pressure doesn't get home, a blitzer can at least obstruct the QB's line of vision. One of Capers's favorite blitzes is Fire X, where two inside 'backers crisscross their blitzes to confuse and re-angle blockers. And Matthews is the most dangerous Fire X blitzer in football. —A.B.

SIMON BRUTY (RODGERS); MIKE ROEMER/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **11–5**
2015 Record: **10–6**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25		OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 20	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 28
at **JAX**	*at* **MIN**	*vs.* **DET**	BYE	*vs.* **NYG**	*vs.* **DAL**	*vs.* **CHI** ON THURSDAY	*at* **ATL**	*vs.* **IND**	*at* **TEN**	*at* **WAS**	*at* **PHI** ON MONDAY

= PREDICTED WINNER

pleasant but vague: "We're doing good." No one appears overly concerned, and he's since been cleared to return.

After an injury-plagued sophomore season, No. 3 receiver **Davante Adams** was healthy and making plays in camp, where bad news about the receivers was offset by good: Janis broke a bone in his right hand just as speedster **Ty Montgomery** was returning from ankle surgery. A ravaged receiving corps, though, wasn't the only reason the Pack averaged 334.6 yards of total offense last season, 23rd in the league. Running back **Eddie Lacy** reported for camp looking like a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and never found his mojo. While he appeared more svelte this August, he's still a dozen or so pounds north of 234, the wishful number assigned to him on the roster. But he's moving well, and McCarthy professes to be happy.

He's less pleased with his tight ends, saying, "That's the group we really didn't get enough out of [in 2015]." Which is why GM Ted Thompson dipped a rare toe into the free-agency waters, bringing in 6' 5", 254-pound **Jared Cook**, who immediately became the fastest, most athletic tight end on the roster. Cook underwent foot surgery in early June, but if he mends quickly, if Lacy can return to his '14 form, if Nelson can ditch his hiccups, this club will do serious damage to opposing defenses.

They'd better, goes the thinking among many impatient Cheeseheads. Matched against the vulnerable NFC East and AFC South, Green Bay plays the league's easiest schedule (on paper). Packers fans weren't mollified by a seventh straight playoff appearance. All they know is that they haven't won a Super Bowl in five seasons, and that Rodgers is 32. His window, they fear, is closing. ("I don't see that," says McCarthy. "The way [Rodgers] is playing right now, he's got at least six more years.")

During their run to Super Bowl XLV, Nelson notes, "we won three playoff games on the road and had some very fortunate things happen. A couple of years ago we had some very *unfortunate* things happen"—namely, a muffed onside kick late in the NFC title game. "You have to play your best football at the right time. And you have to get a little lucky." That, and stay a little healthier. —A.M.

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **HOU**	*vs.* **SEA**	*at* **CHI**	*vs.* **MIN** ON SATURDAY	*at* **DET**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **10-6**
2015 Record: **11-5**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 3	OCT. 9
at **TEN**	*vs.* **GB**	*at* **CAR**	*vs.* **NYG** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **HOU**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 Minnesota Vikings

Meet the secret to defensive success

It couldn't happen to a better guy, as they say. This off-season **Harrison Smith** landed a five-year, $51.25 million contract that reflects his importance to Minnesota, and now the national attention will only build for him. No one on the Vikings minds the recognition the free safety is finally getting, except maybe Smith himself.

By Pro Football Focus's stats, Smith was the only safety to grade out positively in coverage, run support *and* pass rush in 2014 and '15. But you don't need to be a sophisticated analyst to appreciate the big hits that send Minnesota fans scrambling for their GIF-makers on a regular basis. Those collisions earned Smith the nickname Gangster White Boy from **Adrian Peterson**.

Outside the Twin Cities, though, Smith's name hardly registers. Minnesota quarterback **Teddy Bridgewater** calls Smith "one of the most underrated players in this league." Last November, Smith was lined up to do a postgame radio interview for a national program when the show's producer responded, "Who? No, no. We need someone bigger than that." Smith did make his first Pro Bowl last winter, but he was named only as an alternate.

"I kind of like it," Smith says of being slighted. "I like holding on to those things." This is why he doesn't want to be a Honey Badger or join a Legion of Boom. The 6' 2", 214-pound former Notre Dame captain got the only validation he needed in June, when the Vikings made him the league's top-paid safety. For Smith, who still happily drives his 2002 Tahoe, the satisfaction was less about what he can buy than in seeing how much general manager Rick Spielman values him.

If Smith is getting more attention these days, attribute some of it to the contract and the rest to the Vikings becoming a trendy pick to make the Super Bowl—and for good reason. On offense they

BYE	OCT. 23	OCT. 31	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 24	DEC. 1	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
	at **PHI**	*at* **CHI** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **DET**	*at* **WAS**	*vs.* **ARI**	*at* **DET** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **DAL** ON THURSDAY	*at* **JAX**	*vs.* **IND**	*at* **GB** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **CHI**

THE MMQB

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

At 31, **Adrian Peterson** still has an unmatched ability to jump-cut laterally. But for all his greatness, Peterson is a remarkably limited runner stylistically. He doesn't like rushing behind a lead blocker or out of the shotgun; those sets require that a ballcarrier wait for the action to unfold. He also doesn't like to run outside by design; that, too, requires the patience to let blocks develop. Peterson's aversions mean that Minnesota must eliminate several chapters from its playbook. Goodbye sweeps and stretch zone handoffs; hello, inside zone, "power" and "counter"—plays where blockers double-team in the trenches. From there, Peterson can take a handoff and immediately hit a hole. It's predictable, but it doesn't require highly athletic blockers, leaving the Vikings more flexibility to spend on D. All the while, their ground game remains dominant because Peterson is so obscenely effective. —A.B.

↑ **FS** Harrison Smith

BRACE HEMMELGARN/USA TODAY SPORTS

bolstered their line by signing right tackle **Andre Smith** from Cincinnati and left guard **Alex Boone** from San Francisco. Their first-round draft pick out of Mississippi, **Laquon Treadwell**, gives Teddy Bridgewater a reliable possession receiver and a complement to speedy **Stefon Diggs**, who had 52 catches last year as a fifth-round rookie.

But this team still makes its mark on defense, where **Everson Griffen** and **Linval Joseph** anchor a deep line, **Anthony Barr** has developed into an elite linebacker, and Harrison Smith makes coach Mike Zimmer's scheme hum. The versatile safety allows Zimmer to mix up looks without swapping personnel because he excels along the line of scrimmage as well as in man and zone coverages. Smith also helps Minnesota disguise looks as well as anyone, not because he has the speed to make up ground, but because he almost never takes a false step. He has a great sense of where a play will end up, and when he gets there, Smith finishes, either by knocking back a ballcarrier or high-pointing a pass before a receiver can get to it.

It's those kinds of plays that inspired Spielman to open up the bank for Smith, but "he don't act no different now than when we first met," says linebacker Audie Cole. "He's just a good dude." Cole knows this well. The two were roommates, and a couple of seasons ago Smith connected Cole with his cousin Caroline. Now Cole and Caroline are engaged. Smith will play a role in the wedding, Cole says, but the planning is still in the early stages and the groom-to-be does not want to tip his hand just yet. He's starting to understand Zimmer's conundrum. How do you give Smith one role when he can do it all? —J.F.

3 Chicago Bears

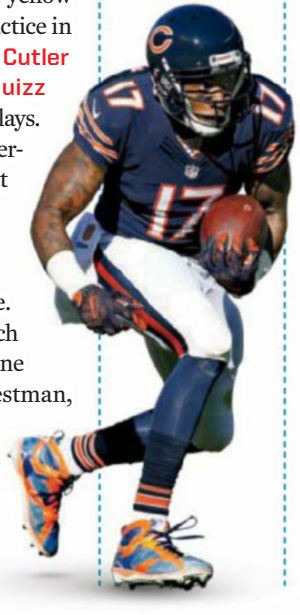
They have their backers, but . . .

At the White House in June for a Super Bowl 50 fete, former Broncos linebacker Danny Trevathan was tracked down by a fan. "Hey, Danny," said Barack Obama, grasping Trevathan's wrist. "I can't wait to see you play in Chicago." Trevathan, who signed a four-year, $24.5 million deal with the Bears in March, then spent his summer further igniting presidential expectations. He had his Super Bowl ring delivered to Halas Hall and motivated teammates by flashing the 10-karat white-and-yellow gold bauble. Then, at Chicago's first padded practice in camp, he broke up a screen pass, tagged QB Jay Cutler on a blitz and smothered running back Jacquizz Rodgers in the backfield—on three consecutive plays.

This is encouraging news for a defense desperate for a boost in culture and production. Credit general manager Ryan Pace, who in two years has flipped a vulnerability into a top 10 unit. Ten of 12 projected defensive starters this season (including nickelback) have been added by Pace.

Chicago's front seven had been feeble since coach Lovie Smith left after the 2012 season. During one 11-game stretch in '13 and '14, under Marc Trestman, the Bears surrendered as many 50-point games (three) as they had in their previous 759 regular-season games. In '15 the D was still finding its footing under new coach John Fox and coordinator Vic Fangio. Many attributed those wobbles to a transition from a 4–3

OLB
Pernell McPhee



ED ZURGA/AP (MCPHEE); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

The MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

Fifth-year receiver Alshon Jeffery *(left)* is 6' 3" and 218 pounds, with long arms, baseball-mitt-sized hands and a stride that covers about as much ground as the blast from a rotating sprinkler. His catching radius is equally huge. Though the Bears failed to sign him to a long-term deal—he'll play 2016 under a $14.6 million franchise tag—Jeffery is more valuable to Chicago than he would be to any other team, especially with Jay Cutler at the helm. Last year Cutler played with discipline in the scheme installed by coordinator Adam Gase (and now run by Dowell Loggains). However, history suggests that the 33-year-old QB can turn back into a wild stallion at any moment. Cutler's arm strength allows him to take chances, but inconsistent mechanics sometimes punish him when he does. A plus-sized receiver with Jeffery's otherworldly leaping abilities and galactic catch radius can make those questionable throws look ingenious. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **6–10**
2015 Record: **6–10**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 19	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 20	OCT. 31		NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
at **HOU**	*vs.* **PHI** ON MONDAY	*at* **DAL**	*vs.* **DET**	*at* **IND**	*vs.* **JAX**	*at* **GB** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **MIN** ON MONDAY	BYE	*at* **TB**	*at* **NYG**	*vs.* **TEN**

= PREDICTED WINNER

to a 3–4, but Fox says, "You spend so much time in sub defenses that those outside linebackers are actually D-ends in nickel, so [switching base defenses] is not as crazy as people think. The real problem: We didn't have the right guys." Injuries vexed the '15 Bears, the only team to use 16 different starting lineups on offense and defense. Fangio felt square with outside 'backers—Pernell McPhee is feared (and expected back off the PUP list), as is Willie Young, who signed a two-year extension this summer—but the inside was leaky. Chicago ranked 22nd in run stopping. Enter the explosive and versatile Trevathan, who says, "This is a franchise with a great history at defense—and I think we can be great too."

At the other inside linebacker Pace signed Jerrell Freeman, an overachiever who spent three seasons in the CFL before flourishing with the Colts. Freeman is above average in pass coverage and, combined with Trevathan, creates a playmaking pair that coordinators must account for. In front of Freeman, Pace added 6' 5", 336-pound Akiem Hicks, who'll team with nosetackle Eddie Goldman for a stout front.

Then there's Georgia linebacker Leonard Floyd, whom Chicago traded up two spots to pick at No. 9. At 6' 6", with a receiver's build, he can diversify the pass rush with his quickness and already-developed counter moves. Coaches just hope he can keep on weight—though an eat-whatever-whenever diet seems to be helping, as does the alarm he sets as a reminder to gorge. ("Everyone's pretty jealous of that," says Floyd.)

Floyd will likely begin in situational pass rushes, but he could inherit a larger role as he and this D (which still has holes in the secondary) gain confidence. Considering the offense, that had better be fast. Chicago parted with steady veteran Matt Forte, pinning its running game on a back-by-committee approach behind a maligned line (that already lost projected center Hroniss Grasu to a torn right ACL). Fox has been famous for dramatic year-two turnarounds in each of his past two stops, but anything more than eight wins for these Bears would be a shocker. In other words: Obama will have plenty of time to watch his beloved hometown team come mid-January—but by then they'll be toast. *—Emily Kaplan*

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **SF**	*at* **DET**	*vs.* **GB**	*vs.* **WAS** ON SATURDAY	*at* **MIN**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **5–11**
2015 Record: **7–9**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
at **IND**	*vs.* **TEN**	*at* **GB**	*at* **CHI**	*vs.* **PHI**

= PREDICTED WINNER

4 Detroit Lions

It takes a village to replace a Megatron

There is structure and reason behind just about everything that occurs during an NFL training camp, so Lions coordinator Jim Bob Cooter no doubt had control over his offense's alignment during a red zone drill at an early August practice. But the constant shifting of personnel still gave the exercises the feel of a speed-dating session.

On the first snap new receiver Marvin Jones lined up to quarterback Matthew Stafford's right. Golden Tate was on the outside to the left, with Anquan Boldin in the slot and tight end Eric Ebron on the line. For the next play Boldin flipped sides, shifting wide to Stafford's right, bumping Jones to the slot on that side and ceding his previous position in the left slot to Ebron. On the next play, after a personnel change, running back Ameer Abdullah and receiver T.J. Jones spread the field, each flanked inside by a tight end.

And on it went. The Lions cannot replace the retired Calvin Johnson in the cosmic sense, but they are hoping that many players, deployed smartly, can compensate for the loss of a surefire Hall of Famer.

Boldin, who signed with Detroit in late July, likes their chances. "If you look at the weapons we have on offense—myself, Marvin, Golden Tate," he says. "Look at our tight ends, at Theo [Riddick] coming out of the backfield with 80 receptions last year. It's scary. There's a lot of guys who can create problems."

That's the plan, anyway. The Lions hired former Patriots director of pro scouting Bob Quinn as general manager on Jan. 8, at which point he began acquiring the playmakers needed to survive in a Megatron-less world. Signing a receiver such as Marvin Jones (who had 65 catches for 816 yards with the Bengals last season) was a necessity. Persuading Boldin to come was a bonus. Though 35, he remains productive, and his knack for making contested catches should help Stafford get over the loss of his longtime safety net.

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6		NOV. 20	NOV. 24	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 26	JAN. 1
vs. **LA**	*vs.* **WAS**	*at* **HOU**	*at* **MIN**	BYE	*vs.* **JAX**	*vs.* **MIN** ON THURSDAY	*at* **NO**	*vs.* **CHI**	*at* **NYG**	*at* **DAL** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **GB**

DETROIT LIONS/AP

Boldin's presence will limit the touches for T.J. Jones, a promising sixth-round pick from 2014, and it also may leave little room for Quinn's other veteran additions at receiver: Andre Caldwell, Jeremy Kerley and Andre Roberts. But rather suddenly, despite bidding adieu to Johnson, the Lions have serious depth out wide.

Tight end is less of a certainty, with Brandon Pettigrew returning from a left-ACL injury he suffered last December. But Ebron, the 2014 first-round pick who hurt his right ankle during an August intrasquad mock game, could be a breakout star. If summer practices were any indication, he will be given many of Johnson's red zone opportunities. Detroit would sometimes shift Megatron into the slot for matchup purposes, and the 6' 4", 253-pound Ebron creates similar issues for opposing defenders. Adjustments such as these will be everything for Cooter, who will have to tweak his scheme to accommodate the changes in personnel without sacrificing the momentum his offense built over last season's second half, after he took over as coordinator for the fired Joe Lombardi.

The Lions' defense faces questions of its own, such as who will win the starting cornerback job vacated by the retired Rashean Mathis. The unit's production tumbled last year with the departure of tackle Ndamukong Suh and the loss of linebacker DeAndre Levy to injury.

It is the offense, though, that is under the gun this season. Here's an encouraging historical note: Detroit actually made the playoffs the season after Barry Sanders's sudden retirement and did so without a dominant rusher. Detroit hopes its new, diverse attack reaps similar dividends. *—Chris Burke*

↑ **WR** Anquan Boldin

MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

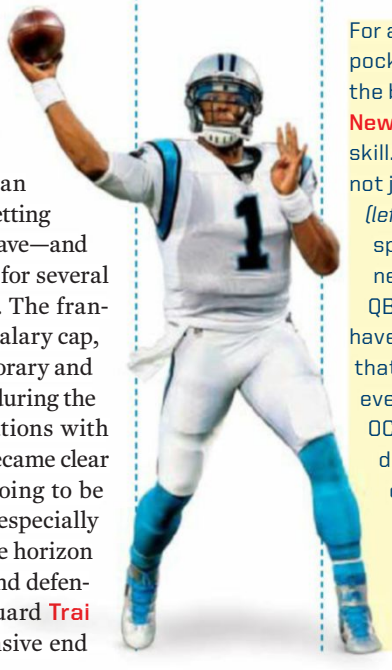
In 2014 the Lions ranked first defending the run, and they finished 11–5. Last year their run defense fell to 19th, and their record to 7–9. Yes, some of that slide can be attributed to the free-agency departure of All-Pro defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh. But it was also due to a hip injury that sidelined linebacker DeAndre Levy for nearly the whole season. When healthy, Levy is as keen as anyone in the league at identifying plays and picking angles to the ball. That's important because it gives the Lions a run-stopping presence in their five-DB, two-LB nickel package. The plus side for a defense in the nickel: There's more athleticism on the field, which helps in pass coverage. The downside: By subbing a corner for a linebacker, there's less size in the box—and, often, one less body in the box—and that means more room to run. A 'backer with Levy's range and instincts can offset this disadvantage. —A.B.

1 Carolina Panthers

The confidence to let an All-Pro walk

When Panthers general manager Dave Gettleman decided to rescind the franchise tag from All-Pro cornerback Josh Norman a week before the draft, the reaction ranged from shock inside the league (Washington quickly signed him for $50 million in guaranteed money) to panic from Carolina fans. The 65-year-old Gettleman was more subdued. "I like to think people think I'm not a moron," he says. "People are focusing all on this, like the world is falling down. The world isn't falling down. We're intentional and methodical about what we do."

In his four off-seasons as GM, Gettleman has had to make tough decisions—such as letting vets Steve Smith and DeAngelo Williams leave—and has been proved right. He let Norman go for several reasons. The first was simple economics. The franchise tag carried a $14 million hit on the salary cap, which would have been fine if it was temporary and replaced by a more cap-friendly extension during the summer. But after two lengthy conversations with Norman's then agent, Michael George, it became clear to Gettleman that an extension wasn't going to be worked out. "There was no way," he says, especially knowing that Carolina's free agents on the horizon include defensive tackle Kawann Short and defensive end Charles Johnson (2017), and guard Trai Turner, linebacker Thomas Davis, defensive end



CB
James Bradberry

AL TIELEMANS (BRADBERRY); STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

The MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

For all his growth as a pocket passer, throwing the ball is not Cam Newton's most valuable skill. Running it is. It's not just that Newton *(left)* has a blend of speed and power never before seen at QB. It's that defenses have to account for that combination on every down, while OC Mike Shula has done a masterly job designing plays to exploit it. Many of Carolina's runs present a read-option look, forcing at least one defender to stand still and keep his eyes on Newton *(left)*. But these plays don't simply pose a handoff-or-no-handoff dilemma; variations of other running plays are built into them. The Panthers might feature a zone run on the front side for the tailback *and* a "power" run on the back side, in which a pulling lineman clears the way for Newton. The D has to account for entire play concepts moving in opposite directions. And it's only possible because of Newton. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **11–5**
2015 Record: **15–1**

SEPT. 8	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 10	OCT. 16		OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 17	NOV. 27
at **DEN** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **SF**	*vs.* **MIN**	*at* **ATL**	*vs.* **TB** ON MONDAY	*at* **NO**	BYE	*vs.* **ARI**	*at* **LA**	*vs.* **KC**	*vs.* **NO** ON THURSDAY	*at* **OAK**

= PREDICTED WINNER

Kony Ealy and safety Tre Boston ('18). "I kept going back and back at the long-term planning with our free agents coming up," Gettleman says. "You can't sign them all. It's not easy."

Another big factor was the limited value that the Panthers place on cornerbacks. In other schemes corners can command nearly starting quarterback money if they are adept at man-to-man coverage, because they allow the team to basically play with an extra defender. While Carolina coordinator Sean McDermott uses some man-to-man, he's more comfortable playing off-man concepts and versions of the Cover 2 zone. Those schemes do not place a premium on the corners, especially if the defense has a good pass rush and interior coverage. With linebackers Luke Kuechly, Thomas Davis and Shaq Thompson, and a D that was sixth in the NFL in sacks, the Panthers excel at both. "I've done studies," jokes Gettleman, "and it's difficult for the quarterback to throw the ball from his back."

Luckily, the GM says, "it was a corner-heavy draft." Carolina used three of its first four picks on cornerbacks, selecting James Bradberry (Samford, second round), Daryl Worley (West Virginia, third) and Zack Sanchez (Oklahoma, fifth). Bradberry and Worley are both big—6' 1" and more than 200 pounds—boundary corners with long arms to combat larger receivers. They've been working as the primary starters in camp, with veteran Robert McClain mixing in, but both Bradberry and Worley have held their own. Sanchez has competed well as a slot corner, but at 5' 11" and 185 pounds he may not be ready physically. Third-year corner Bene Benwikere seems likely to take that spot once he returns from a broken left leg.

"To this point, [our draft picks] haven't shown it's too big for them; I haven't seen the brook trout look on any one of the three yet," says Gettleman, using a favorite phrase of his, which means that the rookies haven't appeared confused. Gettleman better hope that continues, or he might be the one with the telltale look—of embarrassment. *—Greg A. Bedard*

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 19	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **SEA**	*vs.* **SD**	*at* **WAS** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **ATL** ON SATURDAY	*at* **TB**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **7–9**
2015 Record: **8–8**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 26	OCT. 2	OCT. 9
vs. **TB**	*at* **OAK**	*at* **NO** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **CAR**	*at* **DEN**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 Atlanta Falcons

The O aims for fewer in-flight tweaks

Julio Jones, suddenly, is an elder statesman. The soft-spoken receiver spent the first five years of his career taking cues from Roddy White; for three of those, he also played alongside future Hall of Fame tight end Tony Gonzalez. The fact that Jones is now the veteran target reflects Atlanta's drastic turnover since its last trip to the playoffs, in 2012.

Jones's voice is louder now. He knows better than anyone how his quarterback, Matt Ryan, wants certain routes to be run. That wisdom is meant to be shared. "We lost a lot of games last season just because of communication," the 27-year-old Jones says. "There can't be any gray areas. It is on the players to get it figured out and get it handled."

The Falcons spent the summer trying to deconstruct a perplexing 2015 season, Dan Quinn's first as a head coach. They won six of their first seven, lost their next six and finished 8–8. While Quinn felt he had done well to stoke the same kind of high-energy culture he'd had in Seattle, where he was defensive coordinator, he didn't have the pieces in place to execute his vision on the field. In the off-season he and GM Thomas Dimitroff bolstered the front seven, signing end Derrick Shelby from the Dolphins, and drafted with speed and physicality in mind, starting with first-round pick Keanu Neal (Florida), a 6-foot, 211-pound safety who will play a Kam Chancellor–like role.

The offense had its own shortcomings to address. Ryan has been a prolific passer since being drafted No. 3 in 2008, but he hit some speed bumps in the first year under coordinator Kyle Shanahan and turned the ball over 21 times, including four red zone interceptions. Atlanta averaged just 21.2 points per game—tied for 21st. Jones led the league with 1,871 receiving yards on the way to his third Pro Bowl selection, but his 13.8 yards per catch were the lowest of his career. "The talent we have, there's no question we should have

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 3	NOV. 13		NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **SEA**	*vs.* **SD**	*vs.* **GB**	*at* **TB** ON THURSDAY	*at* **PHI**	BYE	*vs.* **ARI**	*vs.* **KC**	*at* **LA**	*vs.* **SF**	*at* **CAR** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **NO**

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TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Second-year coach Dan Quinn wants to re-create the type of defense he had in Seattle, where one of his core pieces was cornerback Richard Sherman. In Quinn's system, the inside defenders play zone coverage while the outside corners often play press man. A premier press-man corner can essentially take away one side of the field; that, in turn, shrinks the space the inside defenders have to cover, allowing them to take more chances and swarm to the ball. Quinn is still trying to piece together his unit, but he already has his Sherman in 25-year-old **Desmond Trufant**. The 2013 first-round pick from Washington is not brash like Sherman, so he doesn't stand out. He also isn't targeted as often, which is why he has only six career picks (just one in '15). But a corner's primary job is not to make plays; it's to stop them. The 6-foot, 190-pound Trufant, with his short-area agility and feel for how receivers execute, is a true stopper. —A.B.

scored 28 points a game," he says. "We were getting 10 points, 14 points; we were barely scoring in some games. That's unacceptable."

The Falcons fortified their personnel, signing Bengals receiver **Mohamed Sanu** after cutting White, and adding center **Alex Mack**, who made three Pro Bowls with the Browns. Just as important, Shanahan sat down with each player after the season, starting with Ryan and Jones. They never reached the point last season, the QB admits, when executing the new offense was "unconscious."

Ryan reviewed the 2015 film by himself first, then went over his notes with Shanahan and QBs coach Matt LaFleur. He also took four trips from Atlanta to Southern California to work with Tom House, a former major league pitcher turned throwing coach. They worked on strengthening Ryan's shoulder and tuning his throwing motion to be more efficient, so that when he's on the run or under duress he could still generate enough power or touch to make the most difficult throws. That will help within Shanahan's offense, where Ryan has a few points of emphasis: Be accurate on throws outside the pocket, and be an area-blind passer, as apt to make throws to the left side as to the right.

↑ **WR** Julio Jones

"Maybe that helps us play one or two or three plays better in a game," Ryan says. "And if we do that in every game in a season, we're giving ourselves better chances to win. As you get older that becomes more apparent, how fine a line in this league it is to win."

Four seasons removed from playing for a trip to the Super Bowl, Ryan and Jones understand that as well as anyone. "However long the window is, it is still short," Ryan says. "But I think we've got the right head coach, the right people in the right positions." That type of consistency would be a welcome change. *—Jenny Vrentas*

DEL MECUM/CSM

3 Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Year two for the QB, sun up to sun down

Practice has ended, and **Jameis Winston** has his jersey and shoulder pads off when an old friend spots him: the grandmother of Bobby Hart, the right tackle who protected him in college. She wraps her arms around Winston and takes two pictures. "I've just been bragging about you," she says. "This weight! Oh, my God, he looks so good. . . ."

Winston blushes. "You shouldn't have fed me all them crab legs at Florida State!"

It's true, Winston does look good, which bodes well for the Bucs. They can replace coach Lovie Smith with his offensive coordinator, **Dirk Koetter**; they can lock up their 1,400-yard back, **Doug Martin** (five years, $35.8 million); they can tab Koetter's former Falcons boss, **Mike Smith**, to run the young, ascendant defense—and they still won't have their first winning season since 2010 unless their QB takes a huge step in his development.

As a rookie Winston threw for 4,042 yards and 22 TDs, but he won only six games. That he made the Pro Bowl as an alternate may have been the best thing to happen to him. There he noticed how toned and fit the other all-stars looked, and he felt embarrassed by his flab. Winston called his agent. "Man, I need to invest in my body," he said.

This off-season Winston exercised under trainer Tim Grover, who famously worked with Michael Jordan. Grover told him: Eat when the sun is up; don't eat when the sun is down. Winston downloaded a Food Network

QB Jameis Winston

DON JUAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES (WINSTON); ROB FOLDY/GETTY IMAGES

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

In an era of wide-open passing, **Doug Martin** *(left)* is a throwback runner in a throwback offense. Martin is at his best rushing between the tackles; no one locates and slithers through small cracks as effectively as he does. While today's backs prefer to operate out of spread formations, which create more space in the box, Martin, who is shrewd at setting up blocks and reading angles, is better in heavier sets, with more bodies around him. The Bucs' system is conducive to this. Because Jameis Winston is a slower-twitch fastball thrower who needs time in the pocket, and because receivers Mike Evans and Vincent Jackson are big-bodied but also slower-twitch playmakers, Tampa's passing game features deep drop-backs and deep routes that use the heavier sets Martin prefers. It's an old-school system, one in which the back's style fits perfectly with that of the QB and receivers. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **6–10**
2015 Record: **6–10**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 10		OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 3	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
at **ATL**	*at* **ARI**	*vs.* **LA**	*vs.* **DEN**	*at* **CAR** ON MONDAY	BYE	*at* **SF**	*vs.* **OAK**	*vs.* **ATL** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **CHI**	*at* **KC**	*vs.* **SEA**

= PREDICTED WINNER

recipe app and started cooking with his girlfriend: broccolini, salads, lean fish. . . . "It's just a big vegetable," he says of spaghetti squash, one of his favorites. "We just warm it up and peel it out. I was like, This is so easy!"

The result: The 6' 4" Winston shed about eight pounds, down to 231, and turned some of that fat into muscle. He arrived at camp looking stronger and feeling quicker, more balanced while setting his feet. Koetter also noticed he looked smoother when he scrambled or rolled out. "We're not saying he's Michael Vick," Koetter clarifies. "But his efficiency in movement is better."

Tampa kept Koetter and his O in place in part so Winston could benefit from continuity, and the QB's progress will be marked by his increased control of the attack. "I feel like I have more of the reins," Winston says. "[Coach is] taking his foot off the brakes."

That much was clear at one camp practice. As Winston came to the line, Smith had his D in a new alignment, one Winston hadn't seen before. The Bucs signed Brent Grimes (Dolphins) and drafted Vernon Hargreaves (Florida) to shore up the cornerback position, and they inked Robert Ayers (Giants) to rush the passer, so Smith could employ more creative looks like this.

Winston recognized the blitz and audibled. "He's almost thinking a step ahead of Dirk sometimes," says Vincent Jackson, who along with Mike Evans gives Winston two 6' 5" receivers with big-play potential on the outside. This particular audible resulted in a substantial gain, punctuated by a Winston fist pump. But Koetter suggested Winston should have checked to another, safer play: "Jameis hit a home run, but I'll take 10 doubles over one home run and nine strikeouts. He made a couple of other checks where I said, 'What the heck was that?' "

The 22-year-old Winston is working to fix those, too—but now when he stays up late watching film, he's not snacking on ramen. He's fine with that, as long as while the sun's up he can have the seafood he loves so much.

As Bobby Hart's grandmother turns to leave, she offers to bring Winston some crab legs. "Whenever you want some," she says, "just let me know."

"Yes, ma'am," Winston replies, smiling, and you can tell what's on his mind. *—Tim Rohan*

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **SD**	*vs.* **NO**	*at* **DAL**	*at* **NO** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **CAR**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **6–10**
2015 Record: **7–9**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 26	OCT. 2	
vs. **OAK**	*at* **NYG**	*vs.* **ATL** ON MONDAY	*at* **SD**	BYE

= PREDICTED WINNER

4 New Orleans Saints

Old pals come full circle to fix secondary

Roman Harper always knew Dennis Allen would become a coordinator. Back in 2008, when Harper was a third-year safety for the Saints, he could tell his first-year secondary coach was destined for more. "All we did was joke on him, like, DA, so you are leaving us, right?" Harper says. "He's so detail-oriented. He tells you at all three levels what's going on. When a coach understands it that thoroughly, it's like, O.K., he's going to be a coordinator."

One season after they won a Super Bowl together, Harper's prophecy came true when the Broncos tabbed Allen to lead their defense in 2011. Harper left for Carolina in '14. Now both are back, hoping to return the Saints' D to how they left it, because coach Sean Payton has struggled to replace them. Ravaged by Bountygate in '12, the unit finished last in yards allowed. It bounced back after Rob Ryan took over for Steve Spagnuolo as coordinator heading into '13, but finished 31st in '14 and '15.

This off-season Harper re-signed with New Orleans, eager to reunite with Allen. "When you've got a coach [as smart as he is], you gotta love him and you love playing for him," Harper says.

They can now reminisce about those early days. They also talk about fatherhood, now that Allen's oldest son is rocking a tattoo sleeve on the sideline and Harper has three children of his own. But on the field they are focused on revitalizing the defense, where Harper faces tough competition. He came to New Orleans knowing there would be no guaranteed playing time, not with the Saints' other options at safety, starting with one who was just beginning his NFL career when Harper last wore gold-and-black.

Kenny Vaccaro made the all-rookie team in 2013 and could be up for more honors if Allen uses him right. "I love the way Kenny plays," Harper says. "You try not to put shackles on guys like that, who can read and diagnose and fly around and hit guys at full speed. DA

OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 17	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
vs. **CAR**	*at* **KC**	*vs.* **SEA**	*at* **SF**	*vs.* **DEN**	*at* **CAR** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **LA**	*vs.* **DET**	*at* **TB**	*at* **ARI**	*vs.* **TB** ON SATURDAY	*at* **ATL**

SAM RICHE/TNS/ZUMAPRESS.COM

is doing a better job of allowing Kenny to be himself."

Then there's the Pro Bowler who was brought in to replace Harper. After leading the league in interceptions as a Bill, **Jairus Byrd** has not lived up to the six-year, $56 million contract the Saints gave him, though Allen does not fault him for that. "Let's give this guy an opportunity as a healthy, 100% Jairus Byrd," says the coordinator. "That's what I'm anxious to see."

An unleashed Vaccaro, a healthy Byrd (torn meniscus), a savvy Harper, plus second-round pick **Vonn Bell** (Ohio State) and CFL standout **Erik Harris**? That's quite a rotation. Allen has experimented with three-safety sets during camp, allowing Vaccaro to blow up run plays,

↑ **SS** Kenny Vaccaro

MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

It's possible that **Michael Thomas**, the second-round pick out of Ohio State, will be a bust. But the role he'll play in New Orleans gives him every chance to succeed. In the aggressive downfield designs that define coach Sean Payton's system, Thomas will be the slot receiver. Most offenses these days use shifty, horizontal slot weapons—your Julian Edelmans, your Doug Baldwins. The Saints are different. They attack vertically and in the middle of the field, so they need a big-bodied wideout who can high-point the ball while running down the seam. Marques Colston, a seventh-round pick, became a perennial 1,000-yard receiver doing this. Thomas gets the first crack at being the new Colston. It can be an easy way to get rich because so few corners play inside, and even fewer have the size to match the 6' 3", 212-pound Thomas. The seam-route runner in New Orleans has a lot of advantages. —A.B.

Harper to blitz off the edge and Byrd to roam the back half and add to his pick tally. "It just lets us utilize our strengths and confuse the offense because you have a different body type doing something else," Byrd says.

That versatility has proved useful against the Saints' multifaceted offense in practice and could be pivotal as New Orleans tries to reclaim the division crown. "In our league today, rather than beat our head against the wall saying this linebacker has to cover this tight end, we've got guys standing over here on the sidelines that can go out there and cover these guys," Allen says. "Let's have a package where we can play with those guys."

Of course Allen understands this team doesn't have much time to tinker. **Drew Brees** is 37. The rumblings around the potential departure of Payton—now tied with Mike McCarthy as the league's third-longest-tenured coach—seem to grow louder each year. But you don't have to remind Allen how quickly time passes. He just needs to take one look at Harper, covered in gray hair, laughing about the old days. —J.F.

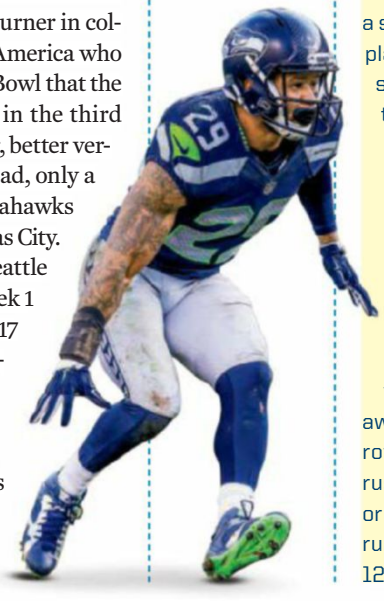
1 Seattle Seahawks

No kidding around: This receiver soars

As Tyler Lockett set 17 records at Kansas State, including career marks in receiving and return yards, his father, Kevin, sent a series of text messages to an old friend. Kevin had played for four NFL teams over seven seasons, and he twice crossed paths with John Schneider, who would go on to be named the Seahawks' general manager in 2010. The gist of his texts to Schneider: You don't want to miss out on this kid.

As the 2015 draft drew closer, it became evident that Seattle needed a returner, and the best returner in college football was Lockett, a four-time All-America who had so impressed Schneider at the Senior Bowl that the Seahawks dealt four picks to select him in the third round. What they got was a faster, quicker, better version of Kevin Lockett. "He's just like his dad, only a little more gifted," says Warren Moon, a Seahawks analyst who threw passes to Kevin in Kansas City.

In his rookie season Lockett 2.0 gave Seattle more than even his father expected. In Week 1 he returned his first punt for a TD, in Week 17 he set a franchise record with 139 punt-return yards, and he led the NFL with 1,231 combined return yards. But he was more than a specialist. "Once I saw him on the field, it was like, this guy is a *receiver*," says fellow wideout Doug Baldwin. "Like, he's *really* good." Baldwin ticks off Lockett's best attributes—body control, peripheral



WR
Tyler Lockett

ELAINE THOMPSON/AP (LOCKETT); MARGARET BOWLES/AP

The MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

Most pundits find it impossible to pinpoint a single most valuable player on the Seahawks' stacked defense—but the name you hear most often is Earl Thomas *(left)*. The seventh-year free safety is easy to overlook because so much of his impact is found in what *doesn't* happen—the routes he takes away, the coverages he rotates in and out of, the rushing lanes he fills in order to turn a 30-yard run into a less damaging 12-yarder. One of the unique dimensions of Seattle's scheme is that its deepest defender does not always play in straightaway centerfield. Against formations with extra wideouts Thomas cheats aggressively to the strong-receiver side. This puts him in a more direct line of help-coverage positioning—but it also means he has more ground to cover if the ball goes the other way. Many D's can't make that work, but Seattle's can because Thomas's range and awareness are unmatched. —A.B.

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **12-4**
2015 Record: **10-6**

SEPT. 11	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2		OCT. 16	OCT. 23	OCT. 30	NOV. 7	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
vs. **MIA**	*at* **LA**	*vs.* **SF**	*at* **NYJ**	BYE	*vs.* **ATL**	*at* **ARI**	*at* **NO**	*vs.* **BUF** ON MONDAY	*at* **NE**	*vs.* **PHI**	*at* **TB**

● = PREDICTED WINNER

vision, spatial awareness—then says, "He's basically a combination of Percy Harvin and Golden Tate."

As Seattle's offense developed into an elite unit, the 5' 10", 182-pound Lockett caught 23 passes for 318 yards and three scores in the final five games. He led all rookie pass catchers with eight total TDs while playing only 61.5% of the Seahawks' snaps—and with a squeaky voice and low-key personality that led Baldwin to describe him as an NFL rarity. "He's like a little kid," Baldwin says. "He has this childlike innocence about him." Yes, Lockett took his pastor to the Pro Bowl, but his aw-shucks demeanor only masks his drive. "He plays possum," says Schneider. "He's as competitive as anyone on our team."

Seattle plans to ramp up Lockett's workload this season—at multiple receiver positions, in motion, out of the backfield. Despite two Super Bowl appearances in three years, the Seahawks have never been this deep on offense under coach Pete Carroll, who took over in 2010. They binged in the draft, taking three linemen (Texas A&M guard-tackle **Germain Ifedi** in the first round; Boise State guard **Rees Odhiambo**, third; TCU center **Joey Hunt**, sixth) and three running backs (Notre Dame's **C.J. Prosise**, third; Arkansas's **Alex Collins**, fifth; Clemson's **Zac Brooks**, seventh). They also nabbed Ohio State tight end **Nick Vannett** in the third, and he's proved a better pass catcher in camp than they expected.

Meanwhile, Seattle welcomes back once-dominant tight end **Jimmy Graham** (right patellar tendon), running back **Thomas Rawls** (fractured left ankle) and receiver **Paul Richardson** (right hamstring) from injuries that cost them a combined 22 games in 2015. Quarterback **Russell Wilson**'s development as he enters his fifth season should help steady a young offensive line. Moon was struck by how quickly and decisively Wilson threw in camp. Assessment: "He's primed to have an MVP year."

Seattle expects to contend again. Defensive lineman **Michael Bennett** says camp oozed a "championship vibe." Carroll, who turns 65 in September, says he was "all jacked up."

Lockett being Lockett, the young receiver says, simply, "I can't wait to try my best." *—Greg Bishop*

DEC. 4 *vs.* **CAR** | DEC. 11 *at* **GB** | DEC. 15 *vs.* **LA** ON THURSDAY | DEC. 24 *vs.* **ARI** ON SATURDAY | JAN. 1 *at* **SF**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **11-5**
2015 Record: **13-3**

SEPT. 11 *vs.* **NE** | SEPT. 18 *vs.* **TB** | SEPT. 25 *at* **BUF** | OCT. 2 *vs.* **LA** | OCT. 6 *at* **SF** ON THURSDAY

● = PREDICTED WINNER

2 Arizona Cardinals

Super Bowl? That's no longer a fantasy

David Johnson does not play fantasy football, but he hears about that world—and his place in it—incessantly. He can't shop at the mall or fill his gas tank without "owners" droning on about how he won them a league last season. "It's every day," Johnson says. "But it's not annoying. I like being recognized."

Johnson's rookie year indeed played out like a fantasy: He became the fourth player in NFL history to gain at least 500 rushing yards, 400 receiving yards and 500 kick-return yards while scoring 13 TDs. Named a starter on Dec. 6, he totaled 599 yards of offense in that month alone. And in 2016? "I expect him to be a 2,000-yard-overall guy," says **Stump Mitchell**, his position coach.

Johnson, a triplet, possesses the skills of three different players: the speed to bounce outside (4.4 in the 40), the power to run inside (squat of 500 pounds) and the athleticism to beat safeties in coverage (41.5-inch vertical and 51-inch box jump). He is, Mitchell says, like a stronger version of Matt Forte or Marshall Faulk.

If the 6' 1", 224-pound Johnson resembles a receiver as much as a back, that's because at Clinton (Iowa) High he weighed 180 pounds and played both positions. Northern Iowa courted him as a flex athlete—the major programs nearby wanted him to walk on—but he gained 45 pounds upon arriving in Cedar Falls. Running back it was.

In reality, the Cardinals were close to sleeping on Johnson too; they wanted Nebraska's Ameer Abdullah in the third round of last year's draft, but the Lions snagged him one round before. Mitchell pushed for Johnson—he swears he liked him more than Todd Gurley—and not just because of Johnson's sick combine numbers and school records. In one game at Northern Iowa, Johnson played fullback, blowing up the noseguard with a block. "There was cheering in the draft room," says Harold Goodwin, Arizona's offensive coordinator, of the moment Johnson became the choice.

OCT. 17 vs. NYJ ON MONDAY
OCT. 23 vs. SEA
OCT. 30 at CAR
BYE
NOV. 13 vs. SF
NOV. 20 at MIN
NOV. 27 at ATL
DEC. 4 vs. WAS
DEC. 11 at MIA
DEC. 18 vs. NO
DEC. 24 at SEA ON SATURDAY
JAN. 1 at LA

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE OFFENSE CRUMBLES

At 32, Larry Fitzgerald has lost speed and quickness. But here's what people forget: A receiver sets the pace; the cornerback must react to *him*. And so a wideout with polished mechanics, an understanding of spacing and coverages, plus a capacity for adjusting to and snagging balls in midair can thrive at almost any age. Indeed, Fitzgerald caught a career-high 109 passes last season, his 12th in the NFL. But Fitz's contributions extend beyond numbers. Before coach Arians's arrival in 2013, Fitzgerald was a pure outside receiver, often stationed on the weak side, where he'd have extra field to work with. Arians moved him to the Z receiver, aligning him closer to the formation or even in the slot, which meant he had to play a critical role in run blocking. That's not an easy change for a longtime star wideout to embrace—but Fitzgerald has done that, not only by making more catches but also by becoming integral to the rushing attack as a blocker. —A.B.

In 2012, the year before coach Bruce Arians arrived, the Cardinals went 5–11 and ranked last in total yards. In '15, under Arians, they went 13–3 and finished first, losing in the NFC title game. Johnson fit perfectly into an attack loaded with talent: QB Carson Palmer; receivers Larry Fitzgerald, John Brown and Michael Floyd; running backs Chris Johnson and Andre Ellington. David Johnson was exactly what Arians had been looking for: a runner who could catch but was still explosive.

Johnson started last season third on the depth chart, dealing with a left hamstring injury, and he caught only one pass in the opener against the Saints—which he took 55 yards for a TD. In Week 2, against the Bears, he returned the opening kickoff for another score (108 yards, a franchise record) and added a rushing TD. From Week 13 on, no player averaged more than Johnson's 131.7 yards from scrimmage.

Mitchell, not prone to hyperbole, now tells Johnson he possesses Hall of Fame–caliber talent. "If he stays healthy, he'll put up numbers no one else has," Mitchell says. "He can rush for 1,000 yards and gain 1,000 receiving yards in the same season."

Arizona's 489 points in 2015 broke the franchise record. Every player who caught a pass from Palmer or scored a TD is back, making 500 a realistic goal. In anticipation of an increased role, Johnson changed his diet during the off-season, cutting out his favorites (pizza rolls, hot dogs, Big Macs). He also married his college girlfriend, Meghan Brock, and they are expecting their first child. The projected due date—the last week in January—could be problematic, given that Johnson & Co. hope to be preparing for Super Bowl LI then. That's the only fantasy that matters. —*Greg Bishop*

↑ **RB** David Johnson

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3 Los Angeles Rams

Showtime, finally, for a fully loaded offense

Tavon Austin needed some wheels for the Rams' first training camp back in California after 21 seasons in St. Louis. So, naturally, the fourth-year receiver called rapper-actor-reality star Ray J for assistance. While teammates peddled bicycles around the UC Irvine campus, Ray J hooked Austin up with a blue-and-gold electric scooter outfitted with Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.

Perhaps there's a metaphor in there about a franchise gone to Hollywood and an offense that has finished no higher than 24th in the NFL since 2007—and dead last in '15—but has upgraded in recent drafts. The Rams took running back Todd Gurley, last season's Offensive Rookie of the Year, with the 10th pick in '14, then dealt six choices to obtain the No. 1 selection from Tennessee this year, using it on Cal quarterback Jared Goff.

The 5' 8", 176-pound Austin, known as Pocket Rocket, arrived in 2013 after running a 4.34 40 at the combine. His speed intrigued the Rams, and they deployed him all over the field, creating mismatches, trying to find him space. Last season he hauled in 52 passes, gained 473 receiving yards, added 434 rushing yards and scored 10 touchdowns (five receiving, four rushing, one returning). It marked his most productive NFL campaign and spoke to the offense's (admittedly slow) evolution. Gurley's presence demanded defenses' attentions, freeing Austin from double teams. All the Rams needed was a quarterback.

Now that they have one, count coach Jeff Fisher

WR
Tavon Austin

THE MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

One of pro football's fastest-growing trends is the rise of three- and four-safety dime packages—replacing linebackers with box safeties. And there's no greater beneficiary of this movement than 6' 2", 213-pound Mark Barron *(left)*. The No. 7 pick in 2012 by the Buccaneers, Barron floundered for 2½ years as a strong safety in a zone-based scheme before being traded to the Rams, who smartly recognized that he's best on the attack, not reading and reacting. So they made him a linebacker who would blitz and chase ballcarriers behind a penetrating defensive line. Barron has flourished. Yes, there can be problems when a 310-pound run blocker gets his hands on him. But with the NFL presenting an increasingly space-oriented game, those sorts of matchups are more rare. Barron also provides flexibility with coverages because his experience at safety helps him to better guard tight ends. —A.B.

ROBERT BECK (AUSTIN); KEVIN TERRELL/AP

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **6-10**
2015 Record: **7-9**

SEPT. 12	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 9	OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27
at **SF** ON MONDAY	*vs.* **SEA**	*at* **TB**	*at* **ARI**	*vs.* **BUF**	*at* **DET**	*vs.* **NYG** IN LONDON	BYE	*vs.* **CAR**	*at* **NYJ**	*vs.* **MIA**	*at* **NO**

= PREDICTED WINNER

among the optimists. He predicts that Austin could double his numbers in 2016. And while even Austin wonders how realistic that forecast is, he says, "I feel good that they have confidence in me."

The Rams have failed to make the playoffs in the last 12 seasons, and their roster regularly ranks among the youngest in the league. "We've gone from 32nd [in talent] to competitive, but we're ready to contend now," says general manager Les Snead. "The guys are hungry. They're tired of being close."

Snead sees depth on offense now more than in any year since he took over in 2012. He notes that Gurley and Austin combined for 20 TDs in '15 and singled out sixth-year tight end **Lance Kendricks** as someone poised for a breakout season. "In terms of having players you know are horses and that are going to be around, we know we're getting closer," he says.

The Rams ranked 13th in points allowed (20.6) in 2015, impressive for a D that again carried the team. Whether they're even moderately successful in their return to L.A. will hinge on QB play. Beyond Gurley and Austin, Goff (who'll start soon, if not immediately) will work behind a young line and with limited options after Austin at receiver. To address that, the Rams hired **Mike Groh** to coordinate their air attack and drafted receiver **Pharoh Cooper** (fourth round, South Carolina) and tight end **Tyler Higbee** (fourth round, Western Kentucky).

Goff headed to Southern California early this spring, living alone, familiarizing himself with the playbook. His neighbors dropped off muffins and apricots, and he visited the Santa Monica Pier and Warner Bros. Studio and ate Korean barbecue with his fellow rookies. "Much more comfortable," Goff says. "I'm tenfold ahead of where I was this spring."

That's good because demand is high now and a seven-win season—a Rams specialty—won't sustain long-term interest in a town with so many entertainment alternatives. "The honeymoon wears off quickly," says Snead, a Dodgers cap atop his head. "In our sport, home field advantage is a huge, huge, huge thing. We have to win here. That's what will sustain us." —*Greg Bishop*

DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 15	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **NE**	*vs.* **ATL**	*at* **SEA** ON THURSDAY	*vs.* **SF** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **ARI**

Schedule

SI's 2016 Prediction: **3-13**
2015 Record: **5-11**

SEPT. 12	SEPT. 18	SEPT. 25	OCT. 2	OCT. 6
vs. **LA** ON MONDAY	*at* **CAR**	*at* **SEA**	*vs.* **DAL**	*vs.* **ARI** ON THURSDAY

● = PREDICTED WINNER

4 San Francisco 49ers

QB uncertainty will keep the O grounded

Nagged by soreness in his right shoulder, **Colin Kaepernick** didn't throw a pass during the 49ers' mid-August joint practice with the Texans, but he did stand behind the offense taking mental reps: reading the defense, making checks, going through his progression. On one snap—a fumble following a botched exchange—he served as an impromptu free safety, running down Houston corner Kareem Jackson to prevent the scoop-and-score.

Kaepernick's "camp arm" widened the gap in his battle with **Blaine Gabbert**. While first-year coach **Chip Kelly** has insisted on listing the pair as co–No. 1 quarterbacks, Gabbert's lead has been clear. Kelly's up-tempo West Coast spread system places a premium on "repetitive accuracy"—one of his pet phrases—and the ability to work swiftly through a progressions. Neither is a strong suit of Kaepernick's, though his dangerous wheels and stronger arm make him the more dynamic player.

Asked if he might use his eventual backup in a situational role, Kelly was deliberately opaque: "We haven't ruled anything in or anything out."

Cynics contend that the *real* winner of this competition will be the QB who loses it. San Francisco's brutal schedule has many fans girding for a 1–4 start, or worse. By that time, the Bay Area will be baying for Kelly to bench the starter.

The signal-callers may get the headlines, but Kelly's system is based on a run-first philosophy. Upgrades along the O-line and 6-foot, 235-pound lead back **Carlos Hyde**'s return will help the Niners be a far more effective rushing team after they scored a measly seven touchdowns on the ground in 2015 and averaged 96.5 rushing yards per game (21st in the league). Hyde's one-cut, north-south style should mesh nicely with Kelly's inside-zone scheme, but he has missed 11 games with right-ankle and left-foot injuries over

OCT. 16	OCT. 23		NOV. 6	NOV. 13	NOV. 20	NOV. 27	DEC. 4	DEC. 11	DEC. 18	DEC. 24	JAN. 1
at **BUF**	*vs.* **TB**	BYE	*vs.* **NO**	*at* **ARI**	*vs.* **NE**	*at* **MIA**	*at* **CHI**	*vs.* **NYJ**	*at* **ATL**	*at* **LA** ON SATURDAY	*vs.* **SEA**

the last two seasons. If he can stay on the field, he could rank among the NFL's top five rushers.

Left tackle **Joe Staley**, a 10-year vet and perennial Pro Bowler, will get more support playing next to guard **Zane Beadles**, signed from Denver in free agency. **Dan Kilgore**, who missed most of 2015 recovering from a fractured left leg, is a vast upgrade over Marcus Martin at center.

Prodigal right tackle **Anthony Davis** has returned after a one-season "retirement" to discover that the job may no longer be his. **Trent Brown** has slimmed down to a sylphlike 355 pounds, and the 6' 8" second-year man appears to have improved his conditioning as well. Both Beadles and right guard **Andrew Tiller** will be pushed by **Joshua Garnett**, the road-grading rookie out of Stanford whose father, Scott, also played for San Francisco.

It has been five years since the Jaguars made Gabbert the No. 10 pick out of Missouri, then rushed him into the lineup, with disastrous results. After a recent practice he recalled his first preseason game in 2011, eight days after the end of the lockout and four days after he signed his contract. There was a slight problem: The top two QBs were hurt.

"Hey, you're starting!" coach Jack Del Rio informed the rookie.

"But I don't know the offense," replied Gabbert.

Five years and six head coaches later, he not only knows the offense but also can use his skill at making short, quick passes to drive it. Behind him toils Kaepernick, who's seeking to recapture his past glory but may have to settle for the 49ers' backup duties.

Until they open 1–4. Then all bets are off. —A.M.

↑ **RB** Carlos Hyde

MMQB

Mr. Indispensable

TAKE THIS GUY AWAY AND THE DEFENSE CRUMBLES

With rampant questions about the offense, the 49ers will lean heavily on their defense in 2016 (particularly considering how often Chip Kelly's up-tempo O compels his D to be on the field). The best player on that unit is inside linebacker **NaVorro Bowman**. Last season, returning from a horrific left-ACL and -MCL injury suffered in the '13 NFC championship game, Bowman was a first-team All-Pro—just as he was for three straight years before his injury. Perhaps because he was on the voters' minds last year, they slightly overrated him; Bowman was up and down, especially early on. He was creaky when changing directions, and his typically razorlike play recognition sometimes failed him. (He excelled down the stretch.) At his best he is a difference-maker, not just against the run, but also as a blitzer and in coverage (usually defending backs). It's imperative that Bowman play at his old high level for the Niners to succeed. —A.B.

JARED WICKERHAM/GETTY IMAGES

WHAT MAKES A LEGEND?

Brett Favre #4
Nickname "The Gunslinger"
Legendary Quarterback

20	20 NFL Seasons
71,838	71,838 Career Pass Yards, the Most in NFL History
508	508 Career Pass Touchdowns, the 2nd Most in NFL History
297	297 Consecutive Games Started, the Most in NFL History
11	11-Time Pro Bowl Selection
3	3-Time AP Most Valuable Player (1995-1997)
1	1 Super Bowl Championship

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NFL Preview 2016

Endgame

TEN YEARS AGO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY TO LAUGH OFF THE QUESTION—BUT GIVEN TODAY'S CONCUSSION-CONSCIOUS CLIMATE, IT'S ABOUT TIME TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER: WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF AMERICA'S PASTIME JUST . . . *DIED*?

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Illustrations by
Andrew DeGraff

Scrimmaging is out, scrummaging is in. Rucking and mauling are legal; the forward pass, not so much.

It is Sunday, Sept. 7, 2036. Still aglow from Team USA's dominant performance in the Nairobi Olympics—yet again, Americans ruled the obstacle-course racing events—sports fans across the republic eagerly anticipate a full slate of American Rugby League matches.

Locks, props and hookers, it turns out, were the primary beneficiaries of the demise of the NFL. Long believed to be invincible, that cash-minting colossus collapsed in the late 2020s under the weight of litigation, insurance woes and the dramatic decline in youths taking up the sport. The cancellation of hundreds of high school programs—the result of exorbitant insurance after a succession of lawsuits—starved colleges of players. No longer nourished by its once reliable feeder system, the league's days were numbered.

The first autumn post-football was the most traumatic. Hotlines were set up in NFL cities to provide grief counseling. Bereft fans learned about DABDA,

NFL

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of coping with traumatic loss. They became adept at figuring out where they stood on her grim continuum of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Much anger was directed, predictably, at the owners' designated flak-catcher, Roger Goodell. While fans and players cited a smorgasbord of reasons for despising the ex-commish—his handling of Bountygate and Deflategate; his increasingly despotic, heavy-handed rule—it was, in the end, his lack of vision and flexibility, chroniclers agreed, that brought down the league. (For his part, Goodell landed on his feet, using part of his vast fortune to purchase a private island off the coast of Maine.) Panicky TV execs scrambled to fill the programming void. The short-lived USFFL (U.S. Flag Football League) gave rise to the more successful CFFL (Coed Flag Football League), the longevity of which had everything to do with the beach-volleyball-sized uniforms worn by the women. That immodest success was eventually dwarfed by the wildly popular American Ninja Warrior, *which begat* Team Ninja Warrior, Ninja Sorority Challenge *and the controversial, short-lived* Septuagenarian Ninja. *"There apparently is no limit," one network suit noted, "to Americans' appetite for seeing some poor schmo getting dropped into water from a giant rolling pin."*

The quietus of football also gave a Haloti Ngata–sized boost to the very sport that midwifed it a century and a half earlier. Responding (too late, alas) to concerns over head injuries, college and NFL teams, most notably the Seahawks, had begun teaching their players rugby-style tackling—target the thigh, hit with the shoulder—which proved far safer than using one's helmeted head as a missile. With Pop Warner no longer an option, tens of thousands of kids turned to rugby. Once a fallback for college football players who saw no future for themselves on the gridiron (but liked the idea of a contact sport with a keg on the sideline), American rugby evolved. With boys and girls learning fundamentals at an early age, rugby, as Ken Burns opined in his 2032 documentary, Death Spiral, *satisfied "those overlapping urges baked into the American DNA alongside the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: bloodlust and the seizing of territory."*

Speaking of which, it is King Théoden who asks, as he straps on his armor before the Battle of Helm's Deep: "How did it come to this?" How did the most popular pastime of its era end up on a slab in the sports morgue? Trying to identify when football's downward trajectory passed the point of no return, Burns and other historians keep returning to a series of events, circa 2016, none of which seemed particularly seismic at the time.

• MARCH 9, 2016 *Pop Warner settles a multimillion-dollar wrongful death lawsuit with the family of Joseph Chernach, a former high school player who committed suicide at 25 and who was found to have Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a progressive degenerative disease that is believed to plague people who've suffered severe or repeated blows to the head. More lawsuits follow.*

• MARCH 24, 2016 The New York Times *reveals that the NFL's own concussion studies—the foundation of a series of league-generated research papers that played down the danger of head injuries—undercounted those injuries by at least 10%.*

• JUNE 12, 2016 *AIG stops insuring football players against head injuries in youth leagues and in the NFL. Other insurers follow.*

• JULY 27, 2016 *After boasting that an independent study showed that its Heads Up Football safety regimen reduced concussions by some 30%, the NFL is again spanked by the* Times. *Upon further review, the paper points out, the study showed "no demonstrable effect on concussions."*

• JULY 20, 2016 *The NFL quietly announces it is parting ways with Dr. Elliot Pellman. The news serves as a reminder that, despite his lack of expertise in brain research or neurology—Pellman is a Guadalajara-educated rheumatologist and a onetime personal physician to ex-NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue—he was allowed to chair the league's oxymoronic Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee from 1994 to 2007, repeatedly using that pulpit to downplay and deny the dangers of concussions.*

"The sooner these ding-dongs in the NFL pull their heads out of their asses," says Archie, "the better chance they have of saving their sport."

KIMBERLY ARCHIE is an intense, busy woman who wears several hats. One of them, it seems fair to say, involves shining a spotlight on those places the NFL has long sought to cast shade upon. Think Erin Brockovich with a neurologist's grasp of traumatic brain injuries. In her other roles, as a sports risk management expert and legal consultant, she has taken on—and vanquished—the NCAA, U.S. Soccer, PG&E and the NFL. She has visited the White House, for President Obama's 2014 Concussion Summit, and lobbied lawmakers on Capitol Hill, pushing for rules to reduce collisions in sports for kids under 14.

For Archie, this is personal. Her son, Paul Bright, was an aspiring chef who died in 2014 at age 24. Bright crashed his motorcycle at a high speed, consistent with the erratic, reckless behavior that marked the final two years of his life. Before that, he'd been upbeat and hardworking. Bright played football for almost a decade, from when he was seven through his freshman year of high school. Kimberly had consulted with the plaintiffs in the landmark concussion lawsuit that the NFL settled with more than 5,000 ex-players in 2015.

After her son's death she asked that his brain be tested.

"All the signs were there," she says. "He had all these [football-related] problems with his knees and back, but his *brain* was going to be pristine?"

It was not. Paul Bright was found to have suffered from CTE.

Even before her son passed, Archie had been an activist and advocate for children's safety. After her daughter broke an arm in a cheerleading accident, Archie founded the National Cheer Safety Foundation in 2008. Earlier

this year she filed the paperwork for a new organization called Child Athlete Advocates that offers medical and legal support for young competitors. She has met with Goodell and then–NFL senior vice president of health and safety Jeff Miller, and she pitched them on her comprehensive safety program for youth football that begins with—wait for it—*banning youth contact football.* Like Robert Cantu, one of the nation's preeminent concussion experts, she believes kids should not participate in collision sports. Given the slightest opening, she will bury you in the science backing up that position.

"Flag Until 14 is the future," says Archie, referring to a national movement to get kids out of shoulder pads and helmets—to end tackle football before ninth grade—"and the sooner these ding-dongs in the NFL pull their heads out of their asses, the better chance they have of saving their sport."

To speak with this woman is to be reminded that the biggest threat to America's national pastime is not the rising popularity of soccer, nor the chronic gaffes and serial dissembling of the NFL when the subject of head injuries arises. It is the formidable power of one of the most awesome collective forces in nature: concerned mothers.

How ironic it would be, proposes John Vrooman, a sports economist and professor at Vanderbilt, "if the mighty, macho monopoly power of the NFL cartel was ultimately taken down by the holistic, protective feminine wisdom of soccer moms united."

What devastation might such a gridiron armageddon wreak upon the nation's economy? It would mean, most directly, that 53 players—plus 10 on the practice squad—on each of 32 NFL teams would be out of work. Each team also employs around 160 other people—scouts, receptionists, coaches and lawyers; folks who work in security, marketing and community relations. Multiply that by 32 teams and that's more than 7,000 jobs lost. Add to that number the legions of people working at the NFL's 345 Park Avenue headquarters in midtown Manhattan.

Equipment makers would take a serious hit. Riddell would swiftly go under, although a Chapter 11 filing may already be in that company's near future. The maker of the official helmet of the NFL from 1989 to 2014 is fending off numerous lawsuits, including one filed on behalf of some 1,000 former pros who contend that the company knew about the long-term health risks that helmets wouldn't protect them from.

There would be a Darwinian shakeout of bars and restaurants located near any NFL stadium. Hotels that once filled up on home football weekends would hemorrhage much of their occupancy and, ergo, their leverage for gouging customers. Members of fantasy football leagues would find themselves with more free time for reading and projects around the house. . . .

Back in the real world, football's demise would shut down an escape route from the 'hood. This sport has been a lifeline for tens of thousands of young men from underprivileged backgrounds. Nope, they haven't all graduated, or even gotten a square deal from universities grown accustomed to enriching themselves on—or, to use the verb preferred by Ta-Nehisi Coates, "plundering"—their labor. But their talent got them onto a campus. Tough to see how that's a bad thing. At some Power Five schools, the death of King Football would drop a depth charge on the bottom lines of athletic departments. It would, as former NFL quarterback and former West Virginia athletic director Oliver Luck notes, force school officials "to ask difficult questions like, 'How important are athletics to our mission? How important is the men's cross-country team?' "

Saying sayonara to football would impoverish colleges in other ways too, Luck points out. While 15% of U.S. college-age males are black men, they account for almost half of all Division I football players . . . but only 12% of full-time male undergraduates. The disappearance of football would drive that percentage, already an underrepresentation, lower still. It would add to the vanillification of college campuses, increasing the number of white kids from the burbs who love hip-hop but don't actually know a black person.

To better understand the multiplier effects of football's evaporation, SI consulted four sports economists, whose opinions were surprisingly in accord. Talk of economic cataclysm is "probably exaggerated," says Vanderbilt's Vrooman, "precisely because the NFL cartel is a self-contained, risk-free economic island, a natural-born automatic moneymaking machine disconnected from the cultural fabric and the economic grid.

"New venues are hermetically sealed to capture all economic gains for the home club and the rest of the monopoly cartel. So, ironically, there

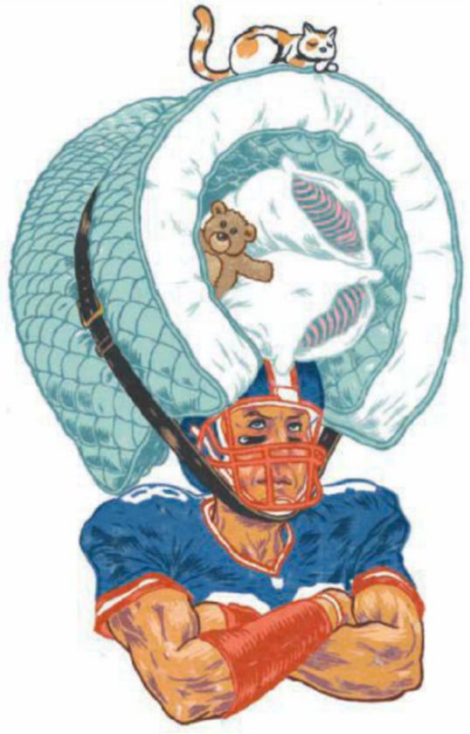
would be few, if any, economic spinoffs, multipliers or indirect effects, because the league gets everything while it passes the stadium funding bill to local taxpayers."

What happens when your city loses its NFL team? "There's no problem," says Andrew Zimbalist, a professor of economics at Smith College. "The scholarly research on this is very clear: There's no evidence that bringing a football team to a city boosts the local economy. You're playing 10 games a year in a stadium that's generally built with public money and goes unused for 350 days a year. So now you're getting back 20 or 30 acres of scarce urban real estate currently used to entertain football fans 10 days a year."

"The size of the U.S. economy is $18 trillion," notes David Berri, a professor of economics at Southern Utah. "The NFL"—whose 32 franchises are worth roughly $63 billion, total—"is a tiny blip on that screen.

"In a city, you might think it would be different. But the gross domestic product of many of these cities is into the hundreds of billions of dollars, while NFL teams are generating, say, [$350 million]. And a lot of that money doesn't go to the city, anyway; it leaks out, goes someplace else. So the actual economic impact that an NFL team has on a city is very small."

The biggest loser, aside from the league itself, would be the TV networks that have the potential to make "a lot of money off the NFL and college football," says Dan Rascher, an economist and academic director of the sports management program at the University of San Francisco. "Those games are must-see TV; they aggregate viewership," drawing ratings massive enough to allow the networks to jack up fees to local affiliates and advertisers. In the Netflix age, live events like NFL and college games buck the trend toward delayed viewing. Eager to see an event in real time, viewers are stripped of the ability to fast-forward through commercials. Should football die on the vine, says Rascher, "the networks will definitely suffer."



"There will be old guys who say, I'm not gonna watch this because it's different," Berri says of a modified NFL. "But sports fans are notorious liars."

But before you pass the hat for poor, impoverished CBS, NBC and Fox, reminds Zimbalist, remember that losing football also means not having to pay the NFL's borderline-ruinous rights fees. When networks sign up to broadcast a Super Bowl, "they don't know how attractive the matchup will be or what the state of the advertising market will be. If they're lucky, they'll make money—but they could also lose money, just as they could lose money on their season contract. The fact that football's a very popular sport doesn't mean that broadcasters make an inordinate amount of money on it."

In the Victorian era of England, widows were expected to remain in mourning for several years, during which time they were to wear concealing black clothing, and veils over their faces. The period of bereavement for orphaned NFL fans might last as long, or—as we've seen with the likes of Baltimore—longer.

"You're not just going to swap soccer in there and everything's going to be fine," says Robert Thompson, who directs the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse. "All those memories of watching games with your dad, all those years of learning the traditions and lore of your team—the players, the stats, the great games. . . . There are people out there who have done the equivalent of *graduate* work on their team—just listen to sports talk radio!" Their relationship with their team, he says, "is like a house they've been living in and paying off for generations."

"That's not to say that if the Supreme Court ruled that football was illegal all of a sudden, other sports wouldn't fill the void. But it would take a *long* time to build up that equity."

WHILE RIDDELL fights for survival, other equipment companies are moving in. SG Helmets was founded by Bill Simpson (who also concocted the protective headgear widely used in auto racing) and Chip Ganassi. The outer shell of SG's football helmet is Kevlar fitted over a foam lining that helps absorb "58% more g-forces than Riddell helmets," according to a Purdue study. Meanwhile, a Seattle startup called Vicis (Latin for "change") is rolling out its Zero1 helmet, featuring

a shell which deforms on impact, like a car bumper, reducing the acceleration and impact forces that cause brain injury. Sadly, the Zero1 does nothing to protect the buyer from sticker shock: It will retail for $1,500.

In an interview last February, Vicis CEO Dave Marver corrected a reporter who stated that the helmet could prevent concussions. "It can't," he clarified. "We're just hopeful it can reduce [the] risk of concussion and make the sport safer."

Can any design, any material, any technology rid this sport of concussions? In a spasm of candor last May, Bills general manager Doug Whaley described football as "a violent game that I personally don't think humans are supposed to play." Whaley was roundly criticized for that remark, which he swiftly walked back . . . even though he was probably right.

"I'm not sure there *is* a technological solution to the concussion problem," says Berri, the sports economist from Southern Utah. "Large people hitting each other on the head—I don't know how that *doesn't* produce concussions."

Berri envisions a version of the game in which the "headcracking" has been surgically removed. You'd have all the running and passing, he says, but instead of tackling, "you put sensors on people. You touch 'em, they're down, or whatever. There are all sorts of technological ways to do this where you don't have to hit somebody. "There will be old guys who say, I remember the way this game used to be played, when men were men. They're gonna complain and say, I'm not gonna watch this because it's different. But sports fans are notorious liars. Whenever there's a strike or a lockout, fans always say, I'm never gonna watch another game. Well, the data says you're lying. If the Cowboys are playing a version of the game without the headcracking, it's *still* the Cowboys. Cowboys fans will show up."

To which this author says, I respectfully disagree. Americans will *not* fill Jerry World just to watch a powderpuff version of the game they were raised on, an unapologetically violent contest featuring such gladiators as Lawrence Taylor and Ray Lewis, Walter Payton and Adrian Peterson, tarted up though it may be with sensors and lasers. Thompson agrees: "It's like saying you're gonna have boxing, but people can't punch each other."

Though it proved impossible, in the end, to remove the violence from football, it was *possible to remove* humans *from the game. No, we're not talking about robots, which proved cost-prohibitive and were soon aban-*

doned. In 2030, geeks from EA Sports and STRIVR Labs Inc., leaders in the virtual reality revolution that had swept the NFL and college football scene 10 years earlier, collaborated on an immersive 360º experience that afforded participants a quarterback's eye view of almost any game. Fans could replay classic contests—college and pro—or tailor their own matchups, sending Harry Carson (of the 1986 Giants), for instance, in chase of Carson Palmer (2016 Cardinals). The Virtual Football League, or VFL, raised $20 billion in its initial public offering and in 2032 took over the vacant offices at 345 Park Avenue.

TO SEE where we're going, it helps to know where we've been. When USA Football was caught in July exaggerating the efficacy of its Heads Up Football program, the NFL-sponsored association hit back with a 1,323-word statement from its executive director, Scott Hallenbeck. After acknowledging "our error in using preliminary data after the study was peer reviewed and published," Hallenbeck went on the offensive. Heads Up Football, he pointed out, "is [about] more than tackling"; it focuses on *all* football fundamentals, educating members on "concussion recognition and response, heat preparedness and hydration, equipment fitting, sudden cardiac arrest."

And by the way, he went on, don't insult HUF by describing it as a mere "course." It is "a multi-pronged approach that works hand-in-hand with other USA Football resources to create a positive learning environment in which millions of young athletes can learn the sport more safely."

So, while HUF is not making the game as safe as the NFL would have had people believe, it is indisputably making football safer. It is part of the solution—that is, if you believe this problem *has* a solution short of making kids wait until high school to play tackle football.

"We've had 'head-up-and-to-the-side' instruction dating back to the late 19th century," says Matt Chaney, an author and football historian who sounds like a slightly pissed-off Tom Bodett. "In the 1890s you had [Yale and Stanford coach] Walter Camp preaching the importance of hitting low and keeping your head up so you could see where you were going and avoid churning knees and thighs."

Chaney has found 116-year-old clippings, too, of F.C. Armstrong, then the football coach at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, stressing the importance of tackling "with [your] head thrown to one side." In his next breath, though, Armstrong concedes that, in the fog of live action, one "may have to overlook the rule about keeping the head to one side." A few years later, in 1906, Pratt cancelled its football program, unwilling to tolerate all the brutal injuries that were piling up.

While heads-up tackling sounded swell in theory, noted one clear-eyed *Altoona Tribune* scribe in 1925, it would only work "if runners could be forced to do their sprinting with head up and chest out." But in the real world, backs like Red Grange "run very low. If the Wheaton ice man is to be tossed at all, the tackler has little time or opportunity to pick a suitable spot of the Phantom around which to twine his arms."

This has been the pattern, down through the decades: public outrage over deaths and serious injuries has been followed by reforms that include, invariably, vows to remove spearing and butting in favor of heads-up or headless tackling.

"This theory has been recycled and regurgitated for 125 years," says Chaney, his voice rising with irritation. "The problem then, and the problem now, is that there's no way you're going to remove head contact from a forward-colliding sport. We don't need a bunch of frigging scientists and researchers to tell us that."

"There are [fans] who have done the equivalent of *graduate* work on their [NFL] team," says Thompson. "Their team is like a house they've been living in and paying off for generations."

A former Division II player whose blogging work can be found at FourWallsPublishing.com, Chaney is also a highly effective gadfly. He has made it his business, since 2010, to correct and update the statistics on football fatalities compiled by the University of North Carolina's National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research. Between 1960 and 2014, he located more than 1,400 deaths—"cases both confirmed and still suspect for links to the sport," he says. In a similar time frame, UNC logged just 904 deaths. The Center has not exactly expressed gratitude for his assistance. After receiving one correction from Chaney, the director responded, "I told you to take me off your mailing list."

Quoting James Michener, Chaney says, "Every society decides what it is willing to pay for its entertainment."

The more Americans learned about the true price for their once-beloved game, the less they were willing to pay it. □

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Initial Impressions

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

IT HAS OFTEN been said that NFL stands for No Fun League, though former Falcons coach Jerry Glanville said it was Not For Long, and Patriots tight end Martellus Bennett recently told ESPN it's an abbreviation of N----s For Lease. Retrofitting abbreviations and acronyms with new and often scurrilous definitions creates what some linguists call "backronyms." And so we might say that NCAA is short for Not Compensating Athletes Adequately, or that NBC these last few weeks was Nonstop Bob Costas—at least until the Olympics became a referendum on Ryan Lochte.

Like another aquatic acronym, SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus), Lochte could easily be a military invention, an amphibious vehicle designed to cause international havoc: LOCHTE (Live Organism Comprising Hair Tint & Equivocations).

This reverse-engineering has been going on so long now that many backronyms have themselves become outdated. NASCAR was once unfairly derided as a Non-Athletic Sport Centered Around Rednecks. By the 21st century, like most other sports, it had come to mean something more prosaic: Neverending Ads, Sponsorships, Commercials (And Racing).

Almost all backronyms are unflattering—that's the whole point of them, as illustrated by the childhood classics about Ford (Fix Or Repair Daily), Delta (Doesn't Ever Leave The Airport) and USC (University of Spoiled Children). Anyone raised near the Minneapolis suburb of Edina knew that it stood for Every Day I Need Attention. Ask any dad who enjoys cycling on the weekends if he has been called a MAMIL (Middle-Aged Man in Lycra).

Even when they're benign, they aren't necessarily fair or factual. So the Bills have long been caricatured as Boy, I Love Losing Superbowls. (They don't.) The Cubs historically have been derided as Completely Useless By September. (Not this year.) See if you can guess who this is: Losing Is Our Natural State. More often than not, acronyms beget acrimony.

And once seen, they are hard to un-see. When we learned last year that the top American official of soccer's world governing body had pleaded guilty to corruption charges, and was revealed to have kept an apartment at Trump Tower for the exclusive use of his cats, FIFA came to stand—at least to me—for Feline Indulgence on Fifth Avenue. (There's also a Fertiliser Industry Federation of Australia, giving us two FIFAs dedicated to the spreading of bull----.)

With the exception of the military, which gave us SNAFU and FUBAR and Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, among countless other profane constructions, no profession is quite so alphabet-souped as sports are. By the time you're reading SI, you've cracked a kind of Enigma code. There are stats (WHIP, BABIP), networks (NESN, MASN), conferences (ACC, AAC) and scoreboard shorthand (CWS vs. LAA) that we all decipher as a matter of reflex. You know every body part—ACL, MCL, UCL—that could possibly put a QB or an LHP on the DL, the IR or the PUP list. If someone GIDPs with RISP in the ALCS, you know exactly what happened. If PATs were on the SAT, we'd all be Rhodes scholars.

Thanks to texting shorthand, we've never been so adept at working out what those letters—IMHO, ICYMI, FWIW—stand for. This is not good news for everyone. The World Taekwondo Federation cannot be thrilled that its abbreviation has come to mean something else entirely in the Internet age. No one would be ROFL-ing at the WTF if they'd emulated the founders of BASS (Bass Anglers Sportsman Society) or AWSM (Association for Women in Sports Media) and created an acronym that was BOSS (Boulder Outdoor Survival School) or RAD (Royal Academy of Dance).

There's a downside to all these acronyms. Scientists say that texting may be rewiring our brains to value speed over accuracy. When Muhammad Ali's life is summed up as the GOAT and most online eulogies are reduced to RIP, and news stories routinely refer to our highest-ranking officials as POTUS and FLOTUS and SCOTUS, it helps to remember that brevity is not always the soul of wit, but often the last bastion of the meathead. Golf is not an acronym of Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden. And FBI is not what it claims to be on that T-shirt they sell at the beach. □

We've never been so adept at figuring out what **acronyms stand for.** This is not good news for everyone—just ask the World Taekwondo Federation.

What acronyms are missing from the sports lexicon?
Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@SteveRushin**

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Oct. 16	@	New York Giants
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Jan. 01		Kansas City Chiefs

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Oct. 20	@	Green Bay Packers
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Dec. 04	@	Chicago Bears
Dec. 11		New York Jets
Dec. 18	@	Atlanta Falcons
Dec. 24	@	Los Angeles Rams
Jan. 01		Seattle Seahawks

Sep. 11		Miami Dolphins
Sep. 18	@	Los Angeles Rams
Sep. 25		San Francisco 49ers
Oct. 02	@	New York Jets
Oct. 09		BYE
Oct. 16		Atlanta Falcons
Oct. 23	@	Arizona Cardinals
Oct. 30	@	New Orleans Saints
Nov. 07		Buffalo Bills
Nov. 13	@	New England Patriots
Nov. 20		Philadelphia Eagles
Nov. 27	@	Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Dec. 04		Carolina Panthers
Dec. 11	@	Green Bay Packers
Dec. 15		Los Angeles Rams
Dec. 24		Arizona Cardinals
Jan. 01	@	San Francisco 49ers

Sep. 12	@	San Francisco 49ers
Sep. 18		Seattle Seahawks
Sep. 25	@	Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Oct. 02	@	Arizona Cardinals
Oct. 09		Buffalo Bills
Oct. 16	@	Detroit Lions
Oct. 23	@	New York Giants*
Oct. 30		BYE
Nov. 06		Carolina Panthers
Nov. 13	@	New York Jets
Nov. 20		Miami Dolphins
Nov. 27	@	New Orleans Saints
Dec. 04	@	New England Patriots
Dec. 11		Atlanta Falcons
Dec. 15	@	Seattle Seahawks
Dec. 24		San Francisco 49ers
Jan. 01		Arizona Cardinals

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. *Played in London **Played in Mexico City

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